

# SONIC THE HEDGEHOG™

In Robotnik's Laboratory



MARTIN ADAMS

**SONIC**  
*THE*  
**HEDGEHOG**  
**IN**  
**ROBOTNIK'S**  
**LABORATORY**  
**MARTIN ADAMS**

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# THE SONIC STORY SO FAR

There was a time when Mobius was a peaceful world. And the Green Hill Zone was the most peaceful and pleasant and generally all-round cool place to hang out on the entire planet.

Mobius's inhabitants were, and are, talking animals of all types. The hippest, streetwise dude of all was, and is, a hedgehog named Sonic.

And of course it just had to be Sonic who stumbled into the laboratory of Mobius's only human, the kindly but absent-minded Doctor Kintobor.

Dr K was perfecting a device — the Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor — to attract all the evil on Mobius and contain it within six emeralds he called the Chaos Emeralds (neat name, Doc). He found the time to help boost Sonic's already radically fast footwork, too, and with the help of a special pair of drop-dead cool red trainers, Sonic exceeded the speed of sound. And he turned blue, of course.

Sonic superspeeded all over Mobius, searching for the Grey Emerald that would neutralise the evil contained in the Chaos Emeralds. But before he found it, Doctor Kintobor's absent-mindedness brought disaster to the whole planet as he entered faulty data into the ROCC. The device exploded, releasing the Emeralds, scattering protective golden rings across the length and breadth of Mobius, and transmogrifying Kintobor into his exact opposite: the evil, power-crazed, obese and egg-loving Doctor Robotnik.

Robotnik's influence reached across the entire planet. Once-verdant landscapes were transformed into polluted wastelands. The evil Doctor's robots scoured the land for animals to imprison, and in particular for the one super-fast hedgehog who has the power to foil his plans — Sonic.

And Sonic has foiled Robotnik's plans — at least twice, by the time you read this book. But Robotnik is ineggshaustibly, eggasperatingly resilient. Once again, he's back. And that means trouble for Mobius in general, and for hedgehogs with red trainers in particular.



# 1

## WHERE'S THAT PIG?

‘Home sweet home,’ sighed a tired hedgehog as he dumped his carryall on the ground. ‘We had one neat holiday but, dude, I’m pooped.’

‘It was brill! That Turbotronic Barrel Train ride was the grooviest thing I’ve been on in a long time,’ replied a still-excited Tails. Sonic could see his foxy friend’s twin tails begin to twirl and frowned at him. Sonic wasn’t too happy, because his glorious blue spines were looking just a little bit droopy from tiredness, and that was a bummer. How could a hedgehog look drop-dead cool with droopy spines? He needed some nachos and cola to put some pizzazz back into them, and he needed them fast.

‘Yeah, well, don’t tell me, I was there. Save it for Sally and Porker and the others. Hope they got our postcards,’ Sonic said. ‘Let’s delay the unpacking and get some serious relaxation in. Like, let’s slap in a video and stuff our faces, little dude.’

Sonic needed a lot of food. Ever since Dr Ovi Kintobor had helped him become the planet Mobius’s first truly Supersonic hedgehog, Sonic needed to eat a lot to keep his whizzing metabolism going. If Sonic wasn’t thinking about how cool his spines looked, and whether his red super-fast trainers were really clean, he was thinking about his stomach. So, barely waiting for their luggage to hit the floor, the two sped off in search of some food.

Three hours later, a very satisfied pair of friends looked out over the wreckage of crisp and tortilla-chip packets and a half-dozen empty cola bottles. Sonic’s feet were starting to twitch now. He wanted to do something.

‘Okay, now that we’ve satisfied our truly awesome hunger with that little snackette, I vote we go find our friends and party on with some holiday stories. Besides, I wanted to see if Porker got that Exploding Luminous Custard Bomb we sent him.’

‘Well, why don't we wait 'til it's dark and see if we can see him glowing?’ Tails sniggered.

Sonic laughed. ‘Nah, I can't wait. Let's go over now and — hey, I've got an idea...’



If you'd been there, you might well have spotted the telltale signs that a totally bodacious trick was about to be sprung. Two furry tail-tips were sticking out from under the sheet Tails had over his body, while Sonic looked out from around a tree next to Porker Lewis's bright green front door, camera poised for a totally awesome photo opportunity. Tails was going to be the Green Hill Zone's first Ghostly Custardgram. He'd practised his spooky ‘Oooooooooohhhh’ wailing ghost noises until Sonic couldn't stand it any more, and he had one seriously large custard pie in his quivering right hand ready to throw. All it needed now was for Porker to open the door. Which he wasn't doing. As you might imagine, Tails was getting impatient. He knocked again, more loudly this time.

‘Delivery for Mr Lewis! Come and get it!’ Tails readied himself for launching once more, but there was no reply. *Bang, bang, bang!* ‘Come on Porker! We know you're in there!’ Still no reply came from inside.

‘Maybe he's over at Sally's,’ the disappointed fox called to Sonic. ‘We can try a second delivery.’ Sonic was getting really twitchy now, and he nearly hit supersonic racing over to Sally Acorn's place. Close behind him, Tails almost fell over his feet, what with a billowing sheet round his legs and not being able to see too well through the somewhat hastily positioned eye-holes he'd cut out of it, but he got there just as Sonic banged on the door.

‘Yoo hoo! Special delivery dudes! Truly excellent despatch for Mr Porker Lewis!’ And *still* no reply.

Tails pulled the sheet off his head. ‘Hey, Sonic, this is getting boring. Where are the guys?’

Sonic was tapping his foot now, a sure sign he was getting seriously bad vibes. Half an hour later, after a whirlwind tour of Green Hill Zone which had left Sonic's trainers almost sizzling, Tails and Sonic were



reunited outside Porker's place, only to tell each other that none of their friends were to be found. No Porker, no Sally, no Johnny Lightfoot pacing his racing outside his home, no Flicky the Bluebird snooping from the branches. Tails's custard pie was beginning to collapse.

‘Ugh! Icky,’ moaned the fox as he wiped dribbling custard from his paws. ‘Let's give this one up, Sonic. Please!’ Big brown eyes pleaded with his friend to let him drop the pie. This wasn't any fun any more.

‘Well...’ Sonic was thinking. That wasn't something he cared for, being a hedgehog of action. But, since they were back outside Porker's door and the pie was for him, it seemed a bodacious idea to rig up a little trap with the pie over the door, just in case their piggy friend came back soon.

Sonic opened the door. Inside, the place was a mess. That wouldn't have worried him with any other of his friends. They were almost as messy as he was. But Porker was a real clean guy. He was always the one who tidied up the crisp packets and burger trays from Sonic's house when he came over to play cards with him. ‘You may like living in a pig sty, Sonic,’ he would joke, ‘but I certainly don't!’ Porker's place had never looked like this. Even Porker's playing cards — and he was very fussy about them, because he hated losing a card from a pack — were strewn all over the place.

Tails surveyed the wreckage. ‘Well, at least he got our postcard,’ he said sadly as he turned it over with his foot. It was a very nice view of the ice-capped purple mountains of Spring Yard Zone. Sonic and Tails hadn't *entirely* ruined it with their scrawled cross and the pencilled message, ‘We wuz 'ere!’ on the front. The fox turned to his friend with a really worried face. ‘Sonic, do you think that Porker's been pignapped?’

‘I don't know, little dude, but this looks totally heinous to me. Let's check out somewhere else.’ First stop had to be the nachos bar. That's where their friends would often meet up and besides, Sonic was getting hungry again.

‘I haven't seen Porker for three days,’ said the chicken behind the counter as he passed a small mountain of soda and nachos over on a tray. Sonic ripped open the nachos pack and started to shovel them down his throat. For now, he could let Tails do the talking.



‘What about Sally or Johnny? Hey, what about Chirps? Jeepers, he's your cousin, isn't he?’

The chicken looked thoughtful. ‘Funny enough, I haven't seen any of them for three days. Except for Tux. He was here yesterday. He had a Half-Pound Haddock Bendyburger with triple fries and a Chocolate Double Soda Supreme.’

Sonic's eyes lit up. That was partly because he'd learned that at least one of their friends was still around. It was mostly because he was licking his lips.

‘Brill! Well, buddy, let's go find us one wicked penguin!’ cried Tails.

‘In a minute, Tails. Um, I think I can handle one of those chocolate sodas first.’



Along the way to Tux's, Sonic and Tails found out that Sally Acorn's place was every bit as messed up as Porker's. That really worried them, because Sally was even tidier than Porker most of the time. But it wasn't as worrying as what happened to them at the shoreline by Tux's house.

Tux's door was wide open and there were signs of a struggle throughout the room. The most alarming sign was that the fridge was open and there weren't any fish inside. Whoever had taken Tux away had taken his fish as well. When the Bad Guys even descend to fishnapping, things are *serious*.

‘Hey, Sonic!’ Tails gasped. ‘Someone's spelt out the word “HELP” in fridge magnet letters on the door. I wonder what that means. Sonic?’

Sonic was sniffing the air. His spines were beginning to bristle with a familiar tingling sensation. ‘Can you smell something, little dude?’

Tails sneezed. ‘Um, um, like fish?’

‘No, stupid. *Concentrate.*’

Tails sniffed frantically. ‘Oh yuck! Awful! It smells like...’

‘Yeah, totally gross. It smells like rotten eggs. Now, we both know what that means — hey! Gimme the camera quick!’

Tails had forgotten that he'd been carrying around the Superbinocular Infrascanning Video camera all this while. Thanks to the incredible technology on Mobius, it was only the size of a very small burger box. (This advance was perhaps less successful than the makers had hoped, for every time he got hungry Sonic tended to grab it and try to get a cheeseburger out of it.) Tails took it from around his neck and passed it to the impatient hedgehog, who squinted one eye shut and looked through the rangefinder.

‘Oh no! Heinous to the max! It's an Egg-o-Matic! One of Robotnik's flying ships and... Eh?’

Sonic was confused. The speck flying off in the distance just disappeared. Well, it didn't really disappear. What had actually happened was that the robot flying the ship engaged Dr Robotnik's new eggsperimental Chaos-Shift Warp Compressor Drive and the ship entered one of the Warps of Confusion high above the planet. However, apart from Robotnik only an out-and-out genius could have known this and, though he's no dummy, Sonic isn't an out-and-out genius either.

‘Hmmm,’ Sonic pondered. ‘I guess Robotnik must have invented a new Chaos-Shift Warp Compressor Drive and that ship has just vanished into a Warp of Confusion. What a bummer.’

Look, it was just a lucky guess, OK?

## **2**

# **GREETINGS, YOUR ROYAL DUDESHIP**

Tails and Sonic were having a think. They didn't much care for this, but drastic measures were called for. They knew that Robotnik had been kidnapping their friends and they wanted to *do* something about it. Thinking made their brains hurt.

‘So, when the ship was flying it looked as if it was headed off to Labyrinth Zone, at least until it just vanished like that.’ Tails was thinking aloud. He'd seen it done in the movies but it was harder than it looked. Slowly, though, an idea wiggled through the fog. ‘There's only one thing for it. We've got to go to Labyrinth Zone and see if we can find anything out before we try raiding Robotnik's laboratory. We don't even know for sure that he has our friends there anyway. And why has he captured them? I thought he was always after you because you know some of his scientific secrets!’ Tails had to do most of the thinking for the two of them. Even though his tails were twitching to go, he knew that they needed A Plan. Preferably A Really Clever Plan.

‘I've got A Plan,’ Sonic announced, getting to his feet and searching for packs of crisps, peanuts and tortilla chips.

Tails brightened up. ‘All right! What's the plan then?’

Sonic finished stuffing the packets into a bag which he draped around his friend's neck. ‘Well, we rush over to Labyrinth Zone and search everywhere to learn everything we can.’ He gave his red power sneakers a final polish.

‘That's it?’

‘That's it. Clever or what?’ Tails didn't have time to say ‘What?’ before Sonic was racing out across the grass of Green Hill Zone, building up speed until *WHOOOOSH HHHH!!...* the hedgehog curled into a ball and whizzed up and over the hill in the distance. Tails stared at him with admiration, but not for long. With his white-tipped fox tails twirling and

whirring, Tails broke into his famous Super Dash and streaked off in a puff of dust.



Now, Sonic is seriously quick when it comes to running but when he needs to come to a halt he can do that every bit as fast. Well, if you ignore the overshooting problem. More seriously, when he screeches to a halt in the middle of Labyrinth Zone he gets dirt on his sneakers because there's a lot of slimy stuff from all the gungey plants and weeds in the place.

‘Oh, gross to the max,’ the hedgehog lamented. ‘And right in front of me there's a...’ But it was what was right behind that counted. Tails went slamming into the back of his friend, because he was so busy trying to catch up with his buddy that he just wasn't watching where he was going. Sonic went flying into a Labyrinthine Thistle Bush and, dudes, they are *spiky*. All Tails could see when he picked himself up was a pair of red sneakers and hedgehog feet sticking out of the bush some yards ahead. Crikey, he thought, that wasn't very clever of me, was it...

‘That wasn't very clever of you, was it?’ came a sarcastic voice from his left. Tails whirled around to see a many-legged creature of a type he'd never seen before sitting on a rock not far from the shore of the lake. It had a shell on the lower half of its body and funny eyes on stalks. Tails didn't know what it was, but Tails is a well-brought-up sort of a fox, and so he reasoned that it would be neat to be polite to it.

‘Er, no,’ he said, forgetting entirely about his hedgehog buddy getting out of the bush and looking very cross. ‘What are you?’

‘*What?* You're very rude. You mean *who* are you.’

‘He's a prawn,’ said Sonic who by now had picked Tails up by his ears and was threatening to use him to polish his sneakers. ‘Hello, Mister Prawn.’

‘I am not. I'm a *king* prawn. My name is Peter, so you can call me King Peter. And speak with the right tone of grovelling to royalty, you clumsy pair of dweebs.’

Sonic released Tails and advanced on the prawn. ‘Hey, like, Royal Dude, I thought you lived in the water? Not on rocks!’

‘Usually I do. But today I'm doing a Royal Walkabout.’ The prawn waved several of his hands around rather aimlessly as all Royals do. ‘And if I hadn't been, I wouldn't have seen that Buzzdownik over there.’

Tails spun round to see what the prawn was waving at. In the distance, on top of a solid block of stone carved with gargoyle's faces, was a machine which he recognized as a computer. Above it hovered a large, metallic, wasp-like robot. Tails knew what it was: it was a Buzzer, one of Robotnik's evil robot creations. But King Peter hadn't called it that.

‘A Buzzdownik? It's a Buzzer!’

‘No it isn't.’ King Peter spoke with the weary sigh of a Royal person confronted with a very dumb subject. It was plainly a sigh that he had done before. ‘It's a Buzzer which does something extra. Of course, it will attack you with its metal stinger if you go near it. It'll try to rip your head off as well — well, at least your spikes and your tails, mateys. But it was here three days ago with a big fat man and a funny looking robot with a hump on its back which the fat man called “Eggor”. And fatso told Eggor that the computer there would be worked by the Buzzdownik. I *think* he said it downloads information from the computer.’ The prawn sounded very pleased with himself for remembering this. ‘See? Buzzer — that's Buzz. Downloading — that's Down. Not sure about the “ik” bit though.’

‘Nik.’ Sonic was busy staring intensely at the hovering robot.

‘No, it wasn't called Nick. As I said —’

‘No, no, *nik*. Robotnik, or fatso as Your Bodacious Majesty referred to him, calls lots of his creations “niks” of one sort or another. Just a little personal thing he does.’ Sonic's foot was tapping impatiently on the ground. He wanted to deal with the Buzzdownik *now*.

‘Hey, like, megaroyal personage, why don't you have a crown on your head if you're a King?’ Tails was getting more and more curious as Sonic was getting more and more impatient.

‘Because it's too darned heavy, of course. And because someone would steal it. And because I like to be a Royal with the Common Touch.’ The prawn looked altogether too pleased with himself. Three answers for the price of one! he thought happily.

‘Yeah, well, thank you for that radically cool helpfulness, your Royal Shellfishness, but it's time to go.’ Sonic nodded his head in something that was very like a bow. ‘Tails — dash time!!’

Sonic accelerated into his Super Spin while Tails struggled to keep up with him. Bouncing off two trees, a couple of rocks and, judging the angles just right, the supersonic hedgehog crashed into the hovering Buzzdownik. It fell apart in a huge outburst of wires, metal chunks, bolts and nuts which went spinning everywhere. Tails was hit on the head by a couple of heavy bolts, which sent him crashing into the computer as he followed his friend. When a superdashing fox hits one of Robotnik's computer terminals full pelt, there's only one outcome; or at least, there's only one that we're going to tell you about now.

The terminal began to hum, the sort of hum that gets louder and higher, like a small child gearing up for a major howl in the slow lane at the supermarket. Buttons popped off the keyboard like someone stripping corn on the cob and multicoloured lights began to flash on its control panels and screen. *Kerchunk, kerchunk, kerchunk* noises came out of its smoking speaker grille. Then it exploded.

What fell out of it caught Sonic and Tails by surprise. The terminal was full of springs: long, coiled, slinky steel springs which expanded in size as they shot out of the casing. They wrapped themselves around Sonic and Tails, pinning their arms and legs together and making a terrible mess of Sonic's spines, which really annoyed him. Both of our heroes were now all tied up (well, they were actually all sprung up, but that doesn't sound quite the same, does it?). And, in the distance and getting louder, they could hear the sound of a Buzzer getting closer.

The only bits of them that weren't all tied up were Tails's twin twitching appendages. Whirling them furiously, the fox rose into the air and concentrated with all his might. Gritting his teeth and straining all his muscles, he tried to get free. But the springs just coiled tighter and tighter and with all his might he couldn't free himself. Crumbs, he thought miserably to himself, it looks like it's Game Over. With a deep sad sigh, Tails relaxed and waited for the inevitable.

Then all the springs fell off. Of course: they were fiendishly designed to tighten when someone caught in them struggled. As soon as they

stopped struggling, the springs just flew off in all directions. Which left Tails looking at the metal eyes of the second Buzzer hovering right in front of him.

‘Yikes!’ Tails kicked out with a simple reflex. It was just instinct, but it worked. The Buzzer whined a bit, turned over on its back, and crashed to the ground where it broke apart. After a few pathetic *bzzzzz* noises, it stopped twitching.

By that time, Tails had freed Sonic from the springs coiled tightly around him. ‘Oh, *grossout*,’ Sonic lamented. ‘Where’s my brush?’

He quickly found it and began to restore his spikes to their former glory. Meanwhile, Tails was peering into the remains of the computer terminal. A twitching hedgehog nose was soon looking over his shoulder.

‘Hey look! There’s one left.’ Tails hauled out the funny-looking spring lying inside. ‘Freaky!’

The spring was more solid than the others. It had some curious chunks of metal, shiny and very smooth, strung along it. Sonic handled it thoughtfully, while eyeing the skies for any more Buzzers on the horizon. A distinctly prawn-like voice boomed over his shoulder.

‘Apparently, those are microchips,’ announced King Peter. ‘At least, that’s what fatso said to Eggor.’

‘You seem to know a lot about this,’ Sonic said suspiciously. The King was about to reply when a small, grey-shelled prawn rushed up alongside, curtsied, and whispered in his ear.

‘I’m sorry, grovelling loyal subject types, but I have to go home now. My daughter has a chronic eating difficulty. Can’t keep her food down.’

Sonic grinned and flourished a packet from Tail’s bag. ‘Give her some nachos, Yer Maj. They’re most indubitably and royally bodacious. Six times a day, before, after and during meals and snacks. Awesome.’

With a regal wave of gratitude the prawns scuttled off, leaving Our Heroes with a weird-looking spring and one snack less to keep them going...





‘Microchips. Hey, food! Are they like fries?’ Tails was excited. You could tell, because his tails whizzed around.

‘No, not that kind of chip, silly.’ Sonic was furiously trying to remember some of what he'd learned about computers in Robotnik's laboratory way back when that evil genius was still the kindly Ovi Kintobor and Sonic was learning to become Mobius's first supersonic heroic hedgehog.

‘But I thought microchips were chips you put in the microwave for a snack and —’

‘A fairly bodacious mistake as mistakes go. But no. A microchip, little dude, is a small chunk of something called silicon which computers can store information on. Now, I wonder what's on these.’ Sonic was unusually thoughtful. Brainwork called for more food, and they were down to their last fifty packs of peanuts. This was getting *serious*. ‘We sure can't use this terminal to find out. We're going to have to find someone who can help us. Let's go!’



‘Jeepers, Sonic, can't we slow down just a bit?’ Tails was getting just a little out of puff. He and Sonic had been in and out of the endless caves and caverns of the Labyrinth Zone, having to keep swimming, moving, dodging the spiked ball traps which Robotnik had put there to trap them, and generally having a very annoying time of it.

Sonic was screwing up his eyes in determination. ‘We've got to find someone who can help us with this thing.’ He waved the microchip-loaded spring in Tails's face. ‘I'm sure that this holds the secret of what Robotnik is up to.’

‘But won't it be like it was before? When Robotnik imprisoned Sally and the others in Prison Eggs and you had to free them across the Zones of Mobius?’

‘No. Robotnik's an evil genius. This time, it's going to be different. You know, like *Robotnik II: This Time It's Personal*. This time, he's done something else with them. And I don't know...’ Sonic's thoughts were interrupted by a wailing sound coming from somewhere far below them. It

sounded like something singing. On the other hand, it could have been the sound of something in serious pain.

‘Down, dude. We might find someone who can help us. We might find something which needs help. Let's go and find out.’

Heading down through the underground caverns of the endless labyrinth, Sonic and Tails ducked in and out of the lethal spear traps of the caves. Time after time they had to drag themselves out of underwater passages, gasping for breath. Floors opened up revealing gaping holes, and massive columns pounded around them from the ceiling as they passed. It was all very boring. Soon they were really deep, *deep* down below the surface of Mobius.



‘Hey Sonic, it's blinking dark down here.’ Tails sniffed disapprovingly. ‘Dark, cold, dank and dismal. It smells like something really big ate a whole pile of nachos and then —’

‘Yeah, well, at least we're closer to that noise,’ Sonic cut in hastily; sometimes Tails just didn't seem to be made of truly heroic stuff like he himself was. Sonic was right: the voice was very loud now. He and Tails could hear the wailing of some kind of electronic keyboard as well. In the echoing caverns it sounded *awful*. Ducking in and out of the deepest roots of some really huge trees, trying to keep the dirt off his sneakers, Sonic edged forward with Tails right behind. They soon found the cause of the noise.

It was a mole. Well, OK, it was *like* a mole but it wasn't any ordinary mole. He wore heavy shades and a radically sharp suit, and he was sitting on a small stool with a funny little electronic organ on his lap. Oblivious to their presence, he continued plonking away with his paws on the keyboard and wailing, ‘*I jerrrrst called to say I leeeerrrrrrve yooooo.*’ It was gross to the max.

Showing real presence of mind, Sonic raced over and stuffed a handful of peanuts into the mole's mouth. ‘Just thought you might be hungry from making all that fine music, dude,’ he said as the spluttering mole almost fell off his stool. ‘Greetings. I'm Sonic the world-famous

hedgehog. You've probably heard of me. Can you help us with this?' He dangled the wobbling spring over the mole's startled body.

'Err,' the mole spluttered as he coughed bits of peanut all over the ground, 'Hello. I'm Stevie the Mole.' The latter part was strictly unnecessary; one would have had to be blind not to see that.

'Well, we, like, really dig your music but we need some help, most excellent mole-type dude. My furry twin-tailed friend and I are looking for some chums who have disappeared. And we think that maybe the reason why, and what's been happening to them, might be encoded on this.' Sonic continued to dangle the spring before the mole.

'Err, these friends of yours, they're not, um, they're not *worms*, are they, by any chance?' said the mole, looking rather guilty.

'No. There's Sally Acorn, she's a really neat squirrel, and Johnny Lightfoot our rabbit buddy, and...'

'Phew, that's a relief,' sighed the mole. 'I mean, you're kind of hefty-looking guys and I wouldn't have wanted to give you any reason to be cross with me.'

'Well of course we're really hunky,' said Tails, puffing out his chest. 'I mean, I don't work out with weights every day for nothing you know.'

Sonic looked at his friend with a sarcastic expression. 'Tails, if you tell wicked lies you might end up facing a Schwartzneggbot and *then* you'll be sorry.' Tails looked suitably abashed.

Meanwhile, the mole was sniffing at the spring. 'Smells kind of greasy. Microchips?'

'You got it, cool dude. Know anything about them?'

'Well, just let me plug them into my Wideband Interfacing Minimizing Polyphonic Outreaching Unisynthesizing Topographizer,' said the mole, clutching at the spring. 'Nothing like a good WIMPOUT for sorting out what's going down.'

'Far out,' muttered Tails. He wasn't convinced that the mole knew what he was doing, but with a few powerful swipes of Stevie's claws the spring was soon coiled around the small box on the side of the organ. The mole flipped a few switches, adjusted a couple of dials, and began to hum.

‘Gimme an “A”.’

‘Eh?’

‘That’ll do. Cowabunga, hero-type dudes, I feel a song coming on...’



Half an hour later, a grim-faced hedgehog and a thoroughly frazzled fox staggered to the surface holding their ears, and crumpled in a heap beneath the shade of a tree. It was better to face the buzzing of a swarm of flying robots than what they’d just had to endure.

‘What a total gimboi! My ears hurt. My *brain* hurts.’ Tails rolled himself up in a ball and snuffled in his bag for some peanuts. He wasn’t hungry, but he hoped that eating might make him feel better. ‘Anyway, Sonic, what was that computer doing here in the middle of nowhere?’ He didn’t feel that he understood what was happening.

‘They’re everywhere. We even saw one on holiday, remember? It was disguised as a vending machine.’

Tails nodded urgently. He recalled it now. He’d tried to get a bar of peanut chocolate out of it and got an electric shock that had made his tails stand on end.

‘Robotnik’s searching for the Grey Emerald. It’s the one thing which could destroy the power of the Chaos Emeralds he has orbiting Mobius. They’re his source of power, and without them he wouldn’t be able to do heinous stuff like kidnapping our friends. So, he has these computers around so that anyone who might know *anything* about where the Grey Emerald is can type the information in.’

‘So how come I just got electrocuted when I touched one?’

Sonic paused for thought. Not for too long, though. ‘I don’t know. Perhaps it’s because Robotnik knows we’re his enemies, and he’s programmed the computers to do nasty things to us if we touch them. That is why we should approach them with the intention of a real cool wipe-out action, huh?’

Tails grinned. ‘Dig it. Now, what was that mole singing to us about?’

### **3**

## **IT'S ONLY A BRAIN-SCANNING MACHINE, IT WON'T HURT**

So, where are Sonic's friends? Well, they're imprisoned in the laboratory of evil madman-stroke-genius Dr Ivo Robotnik. But this isn't Robotnik's old laboratory, with its huge array of robots and weird machines. No, this one is a brand-new, just-built, eggstension (yep, Robotnik himself thought that one up). There are lots of machines here, but they're not the usual ones Robotnik uses. No, there's just one robot who really matters here. And he's called Eggor.

Eggor's unusual. He has something of a personality. He thinks (yes, he thinks!) of himself as Dr Robotnik's faithful assistant. He conducts what the doctor insists upon calling his eggsperiments on the 'laboratory animals', as Robotnik refers to Sally, Porker and all the others who are kept here in mean little cages with thick iron bars. Now, sometimes, Eggor talks to these animals. Sometimes Robotnik and Eggor discuss the plans for the eggsperiments, and someone overhears them. Porker Lewis, who's probably the smartest, is beginning to get some seriously bad vibes about this set-up. It was a remark from Chirps Chicken in the next cage, however, which most alarmed him.

'Hey, Porker, I'm one lucky dude!' Chirps had happily announced a couple of days after they'd been dragged from their homes by a squad of Grabbers, Robotnik's eight-legged specialist kidnabots.

'No way,' Porker replied. The food was okay here, but Porker was irritated by the way he had to keep pressing a silly little lever to get it. Well, maybe it wasn't too different to phoning for some pizza and it did arrive a lot faster, but it still irked him.

'I'm going on a space flight!' the chicken said delightedly.

'How do you figure that out, dweeb-brain?' Porker was cross this morning. The pizza which had come out of the slot in his cage when he

pressed the lever was cold, and it didn't have enough cheese on it. It also had black olives, and Porker thought black olives were horrible.

‘I heard Dr Robotnik telling Eggor that he's sending me to the planet Kentuckee. I think I'm going to get some new kind of clothes — Robotnik said “coating”, but I guess he meant “coat”. Sounds way radically cool! I can't wait to go.’

Porker didn't have the heart to tell his friend what all this might *really* mean...



Sonic was foot-tapping again. This was because Tails was being just a little slow to understand what his supersonic friend was telling him about Stevie's decoding the microchips.

‘So there was a list of all our friends in that computer?’ Sonic just tapped his foot in reply. Tails's smarts were not quite in gear right now. ‘And there were instructions for the robots to bring them to a new laboratory?’

‘Right on.’ Sonic examined a bit of fluff he had picked off his glove as though it was of endless fascination to him, then yawned.

‘And we don't know where that is?’

‘Too right, my usually-triumphantly-brilliant-but-currently-rather-slow-on-the-uptake buddy.’

‘So we'll have to find where this new laboratory is?’ Say what you like, but Tails was piecing the facts together, bit by bit.

‘Yup.’

‘Hmm.’ Tails was off doing that thinking thing again. It was a habit Sonic really didn't approve of too much. He knew that they should be doing things like smashing up Buzzdowniks and computer terminals and bodaciously striking out against Robotnik. He could also see that Tails didn't have any idea what to do.

‘Okay, Sonic, here's what we could do,’ said Tails. Or maybe he did. ‘First, we could find other robots and try to capture one. If the computers don't have the information about where the new laboratory is, the robots

must have, otherwise they wouldn't know where to take our friends when they'd captured them. Isn't that triffically logical? Second, we could find more computers, hoping that one of them does have the information about the new laboratory after all. Third, we could investigate other Zones to see if any other helpful folks like Stevie or Peter know about the laboratory or where else the robots have been going. Fourth, we could dress up as two of our friends and try to fool some robots into trying to kidnap us — bring them to us, instead of having to tire ourselves out chasing after them. Fifth...'

Well, okay dudes, Sonic was ever so slightly wrong here. Tails did have some ideas, and good ones they were too. But Sonic did know how to plan things right. The first thing to do was to head back to Green Hill Zone and stock up on supplies. For a start, he needed about ten square metres of pizza and a tanker full of chocolate soda. You can't go into Super Spins on an empty stomach, dudes.



'Look, this isn't going to hurt,' Eggor said laconically. 'Laconically' was one of the hunchbacked robot's favourite words. What it meant, in his case, was that he sounded like the most miserable old schoolmaster you've ever known when he was in a really bad mood.

'What is it?' Porker retreated to the back of his cage, well away from Eggor's lunging metal arms.

'It's just a brain-scanning machine. Dr Robotnik says you have a bigger brain than any of your friends here, so it should be the easiest to find. It won't hurt, honestly. It will just tell the Doctor what's happening inside your brain.'

'But I don't want him to know what's happening in my brain. It's *my* brain! Go away or I'll bite you.' Porker was genuinely scared now.

'That would be very stupid.' Eggor sounded eggsactly like a schoolmaster now. 'I'm made of metal and you'd break your teeth and then you wouldn't be able to eat the lovely pizza we give you.'

'Yes I would. You don't need teeth to eat slurpy soft pizza.'



‘Don't be difficult. You wouldn't be able to eat the crispy pizzas, only the deep pan, and we've run out of deep pan pizza for the time being. Anyway, if you broke all your teeth it would *hurt*, you silly pig.’ Eggor sounded almost like he would find this end result amusing, albeit in a laconic sort of a way.

‘I don't care! I'll do it anyway! If my teeth hurt then evil Dr Robotnik won't be able to find out what's happening inside my brain, will he?’ Porker saw his chance and changed tack. ‘I mean, why's he doing all this anyway?’

‘That's a Scientific Secret. Look, Porker, if you won't come out then we'll have to use the Hypnotizing Ray on you.’ Eggor sounded eggstremely laconic and somewhat annoyed. He hadn't expected Porker to be such a hassle.

Clunking his way across the laboratory, Eggor wheeled out the dreaded machine. It looked like — well, it's not so easy to describe just like that. It looked like one of those Big Guns you might have seen in video posters. You know, the ones being carried by Big Guys with muscles where most people don't even have places for the muscles to be in. Big Guys with brains the size of peas. ‘Don't-push-me!’ and ‘I'll-be-back!’ sort of guys; you know the kind. But it wasn't really a gun, of course. It had lots of spiky bits along the length of the tube, and dials and flashing lights all over it.

Eggor wheeled it slowly across the room and pointed it into Porker's cage. A green ray shot out of the tube and the machine made a very low *whooo-whooo-whooo* noise. Porker couldn't help but stare at the light, and as he did Robotnik's voice came from a tape inside the machine.

‘You are feeling sleepy. Your eyelids are heavy, and you — ha ha ha! — you are tired, very tired. You are going to sleep...’



All the animals in the laboratory were asleep when Dr Robotnik arrived, very late that night. The evil genius was licking the last of his supper off his hands. It had been his favourite food, raw eggs with a dash of tabasco pepper sauce. Sticky strands of egg white dribbled from his

fingers on to his white laboratory coat and congealed into slimy little pools. It was *gross*.

Robotnik licked the last of the egg yolk off his lips with a disgusting slurping noise. Eggor clanked to attention as the white-coated madman strode in.

‘Master! Master! I have the information you wanted. Look.’ The robot pointed to a huge video screen which had a glowing picture of a brain on it: Porker Lewis's brain, to be eggsact. Most of the brain showed up blue, but there were some yellow areas and one or two small red hot spots. That's where Porker's brain was most active. Right now, the eating centres of his brain were showing strongly red. Seeing this, Eggor absent-mindedly pushed the pizza delivery button.

‘No! Wait!’ Robotnik furiously hammered the CANCEL button on the control panels. ‘He has to press the lever in his cage before he gets the pizza. That's the principle of Behavioural Conditioning, Eggor. Bad robot!’

Eggor hung his head sadly. He didn't like being called Bad Robot. ‘But he's asleep Master.’

‘That's a technical point. It doesn't concern me right now. Ha ha ha! Do we have enough information from his brain to put him into FAROUT yet?’

‘No, Master. And he is only the first. I have all the others to eggsperiment on yet.’

‘We can deal with them later. It is imperative that we have a first eggsperimental subject for FAROUT. Ha ha ha ha! When we have scanned all their brains, and put them into FAROUT machine, then we will know how to deal with our ultimate enemy — *Sonic the Hedgehog!!*’



Well, at this point we ought to come clean: we lied about all the animals being asleep. Only a little bit, though, because here only one was awake.

As everyone knows, Sally Acorn is one cool, smart squirrel. She learned to press levers to get acorns to eat long before any of the other animals had figured out what was inside their cages. Better still, she'd

learned to stay awake at nights to overhear what Robotnik told Eggor to do. Mostly, she didn't tell the other animals what she heard. She didn't want to frighten them, and she hadn't heard anything really worrying anyway. But tonight, feigning sleep as always, she heard Robotnik yell at Eggor what FAROUT stands for. And she squeaked with worry about *that*.

So we won't tell you what she heard. We don't want to worry you, after all. Besides, whatever Robotnik is planning, there are still two bodaciously free radical hero-style dudes who are going to do their best to stop him...

# 4

## HERE COME THE ROAMING ROMANS

From Stevie the Mole's singing recitation of what the microchips from the computer terminal did, Sonic and Tails had figured out some things. They had learned that there was one master computer which held all the information from the terminals around Mobius. They'd learned that that computer also held the secret location of Robotnik's new laboratory — and that was where their friends were. So, logically, they had to go look for the master computer. Since they didn't know which Zone it was in, however, that meant a lot of running around trying to find it.

There's one sad fact in life, even if you're the most excellently triumphant superheroic hedgehog Mobius has ever seen, and it's this: you can move at the speed of sound, dodge some enemies, blast others, dodge and weave, swim, fly, and generally be one awesomely audacious dude. But in the end, there will always come a time when the pizza runs out.

That's what has happened to Sonic and Tails. They've flown, sprinted, dashed and spun their way around Green Hill Zone, Marble Zone, Labyrinth Zone and way beyond that. They've talked to their monkey friends in Emerald Hill Zone, watching out for the mischievous monkey-like robots, the Coconuts, Robotnik hid in the trees. They've been almost fried alive in Hill Top Zone when a volcano exploded almost right under their feet, and lots, lots more. But now the pizza's run out and worse: the pizza's run out when they've just run right into — well, it's best if you see for yourself...



‘Crikey, Sonic, those Chop-Chops almost had us for dinner.’ Tails was thoroughly pooped out after smashing a whole shoal of the robot fish with which their evil enemy had infested the lovely waters of the Aquatic Ruin Zone. ‘And don't look now, but...’

Sonic groaned, because he had looked. ‘Aw, no way, not them again.’ He guessed that there were about fifty of them. A whole legion of the Roaming Romans who lived here, in the glorious forest of the Ruin Zone. He could tell they were Roaming Romans because they had bronze metal armour, big shields, long spears, swords on their belts, and funny metal helmets with feathery stuff on top of them which made them look like out-of-work actors. The worst thing of all, though, was that Roaming Romans had never invented pizza.

(We'd better explain at this point that, while the groovy planet Mobius isn't like your Earth, it does have just one or two things in common. The Roaming Romans are one such weird case in point. However, on Mobius, the dudes who call themselves ‘Romans’ don't come from Rome, they don't have a Roman Empire, and they never throw anyone to the lions because they're too scared of lions to catch any. Apart from that, though, they are worryingly similar.)

‘Greetings from His Excellency, Emperor of the Romans!’ bellowed their leader. ‘You are our prisoners. Legionary, arrest those funny-looking colourful animal-type beings.’ One of the legionaries stepped forward with a spear in one hand and a net in the other.

‘No! Wait, oh most excellent legion-dudes! We are not just any bogus old animal-type beings! I am Sonic the world-famous hedgehog and this is my gnarly buddy Tails. You can't capture us! We can run faster than the speed of — uurrgh!’ Sonic found himself struggling inside a net which had been thrown over him. He couldn't throw it off, because it was craftily weighted down with chunks of bronze around the edges. He was soon picked up and carried off by one of the advancing Romans.

Tails was struggling inside a net too. The leader of the Romans turned to his brother, who had the same name as the Roman Emperor, something he was very proud of. Pointing to the struggling fox, he made the only mistake in his command. Not knowing too much about foxes, he thought Tails was female (he *thought* he'd heard somewhere that foxes with two tails were girls — which shows you how much the Romans know, what with their never inventing pizzas and all).

‘Julius! Seize'er.’

## **5**

# **I CAN'T EAT THAT, IT TALKS!**

‘Most noble Caesar, we offer you a splendid feast from a wondrous beast we have captured in the forest!’ The leader of the legionaries was quite ecstatic. Caesar wasn't so impressed, but he poked the captives with a stick to examine them closely.

Tails gasped and whispered to Sonic, in the net beside him, ‘These people are going to eat us! That's horrible!’

‘I can't eat *that!* It *talks!* And the other one's *blue!!* Caesar will *never* eat anything blue.’

‘What about that blue cheese you had yesterday?’ the legionaries' leader countered daringly.

‘Well...’

‘And what about blueberries?’

‘Yes, all right, but —’

‘Or that blue bread you had for breakfast?’

‘That was mouldy. I didn't notice in time. That doesn't count.’

‘Well, what about that blueberry ice-cream soda you had after dinner last night when you said you couldn't eat more grapes, then?’

Tails suddenly felt a lot happier. At last, the Romans had invented ice cream. That sounded slammin' good.

The Emperor suddenly remembered who he was. ‘Shut up! How dare you challenge Caesar in this manner! One more peep out of you and I'll feed you to... oh, I don't know, I'll think of something. Now, release this talking twin-tailed person and his blue friend. Caesar will speak with them. Bring them to my throne.’

Sonic and Tails were disappointed. It really wasn't much of a throne. To be totally honest, it was just a moss-covered old tree stump in the

forest, but this Caesar fellow seemed like a reasonably cool dude. He wore funny clothes, including that funny tangled-up sheet he called a 'toga', but that seemed to be normal for the Roaming Romans.

'What brings you to our forest then?' Caesar was nothing if not direct.

'Oh mighty Emperor-type dude, we have come to seek the computer term — *yikes!!!!*' Tails let out a yell of pain. Sonic had just kicked him in the shin to shut him up. Sonic didn't think they should give their secret quest away.

'Well, Your Most Neat Radical Majesty,' Sonic hastily covered, 'we came to sample the blueberry ice-cream soda you are so famous for.'

'But we only invented it yesterday!' Caesar squealed.

'News travels quickly, Your Dudeship.'

'Hmmm.' Caesar sat back on his throne. 'Somehow, I don't believe you. I think that when your friend was about to mention a computer terminal, that's what you are really here for.'

'Ah, erm, no, Yer Maj. It is a secret code we have where we come from. When we say, "computer terminal", we really mean "blueberry ice-cream soda". It is a cool secret code.' Beside him, Tails slapped one hand over his eyes in honour of this most preposterous of explanations. Sonic continued, 'We use this code to prevent heinous spies from learning our plans. This way, we can stop them from getting to the soda first.' Sonic was very pleased with himself. He had thought that one up almost as fast as he could run, and that was *fast*.

Caesar tried to rise majestically from his throne. He didn't make it. His left foot caught in a trailing vine, he tripped over and fell backwards with his legs wriggling in the air. Everyone sniggered a lot, except for Sonic. Finding out that the Roaming Romans were ruled by a dude who wore boxer shorts with big yellow flowers on them underneath his toga was grody to the max.

Caesar dusted himself off and pointed a furious finger at his prisoners. Unfortunately, Tails was still sniggering. 'Bring them to the amphitheatre!' he commanded.

The legionaries shuddered. 'Oh no, not the amphitheatre!'



‘Oh yes indeed!’ Caesar strode up the forested hill, with Sonic and Tails being dragged along behind. When they reached the top of the hill, the prisoners were able to see a huge stone circle below. It was like a stadium for athletics and other healthy sporting pursuits, except that it was all made of stone.

‘I don't fancy sitting in that,’ Tails moaned. ‘It looks very uncomfortable.’

‘You will not be sitting! Guards, take them to the Competitor's Entrance.’



A few minutes later, Sonic and Tails found themselves, each with a short spear in one hand and a net in the other, in the middle of the huge arena. The place was full of cheering Roaming Romans, and Caesar looked down from his Royal Box with a blueberry ice-cream soda in one hand, and pointing down with the thumb of his other hand.

‘Maybe he's ordering some for us,’ Tails said hopefully.

‘Sorry to have to tell you, but I don't think so, little dude. Look over there.’ In the distance two huge wooden doors opened out into the arena and six enormous Romans with ten-metre-long spears walked in to more cheering. Well, okay, the spears weren't quite that long but they were very long indeed. However, Caesar's plan had one minor flaw. The Roaming Romans didn't know that Sonic and Tails can jump and fly.

‘Time to go, buddy. Twirl those triumphant tails and let's party on out!’ Sonic started to run around the arena with the Roman gladiators in hot pursuit. He ran faster and faster, curled up into a ball, spun around and bounced off the wall. Sonic hit the Royal Box with an impact that splashed soda all over Caesar's toga, and shot way off into the sky. Tails wasn't far behind. Sonic cartwheeled over and over and *SPLASH!!* — went straight down into the lake beyond the forest. All he left behind him was a big cloud of air bubbles which broke the surface with a ripple of tiny pops.

Tails stopped to think for, oh, let's call it a thousandth of a second, and dived right in after his friend. Let's hope Roaming Romans don't swim, he thought. Stewth, what's down here? The water was very cold, and very

dark. He could just see Sonic spinning over and over in front of him, and he caught some of the bubbles still rising from the water below. Way to go, Tails, he thought. Looks like there's enough air to breathe down here and we must reach the bottom of the lake soon, and then we can swim back up...

That's when they hit the Accelerator Chute. Of course, life got a bit more interesting and tricky after that.

# 6

## A FAST LITTLE INTERLUDE

The infamous Accelerator Chute was right at the bottom of the lake. It led downwards at a sharp angle and once Tails and Sonic were on it, they couldn't stop, because it was covered in a thick layer of slimy pond weed. It wasn't *really* infamous, of course, because no one had ever heard of it, what with it having only been there for a few days, but it was still a major bummer to be on it.

Sonic's air supply was beginning to get low. I've been here before, he remembered, and I'm sure this wasn't here then. Oh no, it's another of Robotnik's traps. Maximum heinousity!

He was heading down so fast that he only just saw and managed to grab the rings above him before he hit the bottom of the chute. Then he found himself being thrown way back up again as the chute turned over on itself and spiralled up, up, over, down and round. Sonic was out of his spin now, and running as fast as he could to get to somewhere where there was air. He was able to catch a bubble or two occasionally, but he needed to get to the safety of dry land fast.

'Oh no!' he groaned as he hurtled around a final bend towards what looked like the entrance to a maze in the near distance. The Chop-Chop had seen him coming. It was right in the entranceway to the maze and it was twice as large as most of its kind. It opened its enormous metal jaws to reveal a mouth so big you could have driven a ten-wheeled truck down it. And as for its teeth...

Cowabunga! Sonic remembered he'd grabbed a fistful of rings on his superspeeding descent down the chute. With enough rings, most awesomely cool dude that I am, I can get past this dorkbot, he thought grimly. It's hero time!

Sonic was just too fast for the Chop-Chop. He sped right past it as its enormous jaws snapped shut. Sonic headed through the maze entrance, and

struggled up to the air he could see above him. Breaking surface, he gulped down a huge mouthful of gorgeous oxygen as he hauled himself on to the stone surface at the top of the maze wall. After a few moments he recovered enough to take stock of what had happened. Way to go, dude, he told himself — but where's my buddy?

Of course, if Sonic had been looking behind him, he'd have seen the Chop-Chop slamming its jaws shut so hard that it lost its balance and Tails, skittering right towards a huge row of metal teeth, was able to stomp it and bounce off and right up out of the water, through the maze entranceway and *SLAMMMMMMMM!* Right into the back of a hedgehog who was just turning around, a bit out of breath. Sonic made a very big splash as he hit the water, and when he hauled himself out again he found Tails hiding behind a rock, with just the tips of his ears and tails visible. They were twitching just a little as the fox tried and failed to restrain his shamefaced laughter.

‘Little buddy, that's twice you've done that during just one short, although admittedly totally cool, adventure to date. We're going to have to fit you with some brakes, Tails.’

# **7**

## **MORE EGGSPERIMENTS!**

Johnny Lightfoot wasn't sure whether to be happy or not. What really annoyed him about being in a cage was that he couldn't practise his sprints and runs. Of course, there was no way he'd ever be as fast as Sonic, but he liked to be one totally active rabbit. So when Eggor fitted a big metal running wheel to his cage, it looked good. But what Eggor said was a real downer.

‘Good Dr Robotnik wants to do some special eggsercise eggperiments with you,’ the robot drawled. ‘We want to scan your brain while you are running quickly.’

It was obvious what that meant. Robotnik was convinced (quite rightly, as it happens, but that's neither here nor there) that Sonic was the one being on Mobius who could foil his evil plans to rule the planet, and the more he could learn about Sonic's Super Spin attack, the better the chance he'd have of overcoming him. Unfortunately, Robotnik had lost all his notes on how he'd taught Sonic to be so fast in the first place. They had all been scattered over the planet when his ROCC machine had eggsplored. Everyone knew that.

So Johnny ran around in the wheel. Just a bit. Not enough for Eggor to see what it was like when he really sprinted flat out.

‘You're not going quickly enough. Work harder or you won't get any carrots.’

Johnny tried stalling for time. ‘Yuk! I don't like carrots, robot-face. I want burger and fries, yeah, and a deep-pan too, go heavy on the cheese. Plus a double-chocolate —’

‘Go faster! Faster, I said!’ Eggor beat impatiently on the bars of the cage with his metal hands.

Johnny ran just a little bit faster. He knew it was nowhere near as fast as Sonic or Tails could travel, though, so he felt he wasn't giving away any secrets which Robotnik might find useful.

It wasn't enough for Eggor. 'Faster! Go eggstremely fast now!'

Johnny decided to do some acting. He deliberately lost his footing, spun around in the wheel, half-threw himself out of it and lay groaning on the bottom of his cage. It was an award-winning performance.

'You monster! Look what you've done to poor Johnny!' Sally Acorn's angry and bossy voice rang out across the laboratory. She didn't know he was acting, so she was genuinely angry. And she was always a bit bossy. When she sounded both at the same time, most of her friends did what she told them to do without arguing!

Eggor looked nonplussed for a moment. Well, perhaps he wasn't nonplussed, but he definitely didn't exactly look plussed either. The robot made a funny grunting noise and shambled off down the corridor, through the heavy steel doors which hissed as they slid shut behind him. A few minutes later he re-appeared through the doors, carrying an enormous steaming deep-pan pizza with more cheese on it than you've ever seen on a pizza, like, ever. A small compartment on the back of the robot's left wrist opened and a pizza cutter flopped out, unfolded itself, and cut an enormous slice, which he passed through the bars into Johnny's cage.

'Gosh! You know what I think? I think that robot's got feelings!' Sally whispered to Joe Sushi, the walrus in the next cage along.

'No I haven't. I'm a robot.' Unfortunately, one thing Eggor did have was eggstremely keen hearing.

'But you're being kind.' Sally smiled at Eggor.

'No I'm not. It's all part of my Behavioural Conditioning Program,' Eggor announced stiffly.

'What's a behavioural whatchamacallit then?' Sally deliberately played dumb. She wanted to get all the information she could from Eggor, who for once seemed ready to talk.

'I don't know, do I? I'm a robot, not a psychologist. Dr Robotnik is a brilliant psychologist. I know, because he told me. He's got the Mobius Prize for Advanced Behavioural Psychology, you know.'

'Yes,' Sally replied tartly, 'that's because he's the one who decides who gets the prizes. He even awards them to himself. He's got the Mobius

Prize for absolutely everything.'

'No he hasn't!' Eggor sounded a bit indignant.

'Oh yes he has!' Sally replied.

'Oh no he hasn't!' Eggor snapped back.

'*OH YES HE HAS!!*' chorused all the prisoners.

'Look, I'm not playing that game. I've got work to do.' Eggor turned to leave, but Sally wanted to find out anything else she could. She figured out that, the more she learned, the better a chance she might have of thinking of a way to escape. Of course, she secretly hoped that brave Sonic and Tails would come to their rescue, but it did no harm to have a plan of her own just in case that didn't quite work out.

'But what's it all for then?' She opened her eyes big and wide and fluttered her eyelashes at the robot. That often worked with her friends, but robots are immune to that kind of thing. Nonetheless, Eggor gave just a little away.

'Well, after you've been trained with the Behavioural Conditioning Program and we've scanned all your brains, Dr Robotnik will use you as guinea pigs for the FAROUT machine.' Eggor knew that Robotnik also hoped to learn something about Sonic's powers from studying his friends, but he wasn't going to let that slip.

'But I'm not a guinea pig, I'm a squirrel! And Joe here is a walrus, and —'

'I was speaking metaphorically,' Eggor said, speaking laconically.

'But robots can't speak metaphorically. I saw that on an educational video. Robots can only use literal expressions. "Metaphor is beyond their linguistic capability".' Sally was reciting something she'd remembered from the video. She hadn't much idea what it meant, but she thought it sounded pretty cool, mostly because it had some radically long words in it. To her surprise, Eggor stood quite still for quite some time and then he rubbed his metal chin with his right hand. Somehow his metal face had acquired a somewhat ponderous aspect.

'Hmmm. That never occurred to me before. I shall go away and think on this further. Perhaps I need an oil change.' Stumping off, the robot left



through the hissing doors, still rubbing his chin.

‘Hey, neat goin', Sally!’ Johnny Lightfoot's happy voice drifted over from the cage opposite.

‘Yeah, neat one, way to go!’ Chirps Chicken piped up. ‘That confused him.’

Sally wasn't so easily pleased. She hadn't learned what the FAROUT machine was, and she knew somehow that it was something really nasty designed to destroy her buddies Sonic and Tails.

‘Listen, guys, we're going to have to play for time here,’ Sally explained. ‘We can't let them get us into the FAROUT machine. We've got to delay them. This is what we ought to do...’

## 8

# INTO THE COMPUTER

Sonic and Tails were in trouble. A quick swim back, just to check things out, had shown Tails that a dozen very mean-looking Chop-Chops were posted outside the entrance to the maze. Don't ask how he knew, but they looked like they might be waiting for a really mean robot to turn up and lead them into the maze. Maybe even a really mean robot with the right code and a map of the maze to hunt Sonic and Tails down. At least, that's what Tails thought.

‘Dude, you are one triumphantly optimistic little dude,’ sighed Sonic.

‘Sorry, Sonic. It was just a thought.’ Tails looked at his feet.

‘Which just goes to show that you think too much, little dude. Let's get moving!’

Unfortunately, it wasn't that easy. A whole series of dives and swimming trips showed Sonic and his best friend that the underwater maze they had entered had no exits apart from the way they'd entered by. They even tried spinning and bouncing off walls looking for any secret ways out, but there weren't any.

‘And this is the last packet of barbecue-flavour peanuts. Oh, what a total and utter washout,’ moaned an unhappy hedgehog. ‘Looks like we'll have to blast our way through those bots outside. But this is radically weird. I know this place is new; Robotnik must have built it recently. There has to be something, dude.’

Tails suddenly had a really superb idea. It had taken a long time coming, for it was going through unexplored territory, but at last it was here. This is what it was: ‘If it's new, then — this must be the way to find the master computer terminal! If that's new as well, and Stevie the Mole said it was, surely it's got to be here!’

‘Cowabunga!!!!’ Sonic was so excited he leapt up — and hit his head on the ceiling. Coming rapidly back to ground, the rueful hedgehog rubbed

his head. 'Ouch with triple fries to go; I'm going to have a bump as big as one of Robotnik's eggs!'

Tails didn't reply. He was too busy gawking at the ceiling. They'd thought it was made of stone, but two huge panels covering the ceiling were slowly sliding apart to reveal a huge metal plate covering the whole area above the underwater maze. There were ten rows of shiny metal panels which protruded slightly from the plate, and they all glowed with a dim red light.

'Um, Sonic,' Tails murmured, 'sorry to bring this up, but does that look like some kind of computer control system or what?'

Tails wanted to think about it. Sonic was too excited to bother with that. He just went instantly supersonic, rolled up for that world-famous Spin Attack, and hurtled up to start bouncing off the panels. It wasn't a good idea. He'd hit five of them before he noticed that every time he did so, the panel slid open and a Whisp flew out. A Whisp is one of Robotnik's vile fly-like robots, and now there was a whole swarm of them. They buzzed angrily and flew to attack Tails and Sonic.

'Yikes!!' Tails was airborne now. He'd managed to pick up a couple of Rings on his passage through the chute, but there were enough Whisps to be dangerous even with the protection of the Rings. He blasted the first one by bouncing it by sheer luck, but from there on in it was tricky. Especially because an almost out-of-control Sonic had hit another three panels and the Whisps seemed to be flying down in squadrons...



'Well, so much for that idea. I got five certain and no probables, reports ace flier Sonic the bodaciously world-famous superspeeding flying hero.' Sonic was full of himself as the last Whisp, bounced to a pulp, sunk into the waters of the maze. 'Now for the Chop-Chops, little dude. C'mon, let's go.'

Tails begged to differ. 'No, wait! This has got to be it! The answer isn't in the maze, right?'

'Most totally tubularly and indubitably correct to the max. Hate to say it, but you're right.'

‘And there wasn't anything along the chute, right?’ Tails screwed up his furry face to allow some really strong thinking to come out.

‘Well, we didn't exactly have the time to check it out, dude, but on the whole I would be radically inclined to most awesomely agree with your bodacious estimation.’ It wasn't often Sonic got long-winded. When he did, it was because his head was too full of the desire to get moving, so he talked long-winded half-nonsense. (Let's face it, that's true of a lot of folks, not just Sonic, but that's another matter.)

‘So the answer must be on the ceiling. When you have eliminated the impossible, what remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth. Or something,’ Tails pronounced.

Sonic stared at his friend with a new-found admiration. ‘Hey, dudeling, that sounds brilliant! You're a genius!’

‘Well, I think I heard it on a video sometime. Anyway, let's take a closer look.’ They screwed up their eyes and looked hard.

‘Okay, so there are ten rows with 26 panels in each row. That looks like 260 ways to be totally wrong. I think I hit about ten of them. Shall we hit the other 250 ways to get bumps on the head and Whisps flying around our ears, Tails?’

Tails was considering this when a buzzing sound began to get louder underneath them. It was a funny kind of buzzing, because it came from underwater, but the important thing was that it was getting louder. And louder. Oh yeah, and LOUDER! Tails and Sonic just managed to get behind a rock before the huge Buzzdownik broke the surface of the water and flapped up to the ceiling above. This robot was much larger than the other one they'd defeated, and it had wings as well, but Sonic wanted to attack it anyway.

Tails held him back. ‘No, wait! Let's watch what it does.’

The robot buzzed and hovered, going from one row of panels to the next, pressing one panel from each row in turn. After it had pressed one panel in each of the ten rows, it sunk its metal jaws into a huge socket at the base of the metal plaque and buzzed while its eyes lit up. The entire panel glowed red and a screen suddenly appeared on it, with the message

‘TRANSFER COMPLETED’ in huge letters. The Buzzdownnik detached its jaws, plummeted down into the water, and was gone.

‘Oh yeah, of course! Brilliant! Mega!’ Tails was jumping up and down in joy. Sonic couldn't understand what was making his friend feel so good.

‘Whoa! What's goin' down, radically excited little foxy-faced dude?’

Tails was beaming from ear to ear. ‘I checked out the ones he pressed, right? Here's the first five. Number 19. Number 15. Number 14. Number 9. Number 3. Change them to letters and what have you got?’

Sonic was right with him. ‘Awesome! Gimme an S, gimme an O, gimme an N, gimme an I, gimme a C and what have you got?’

The answer echoed all round the cavern about the underwater maze. ‘SONIC!!!’

‘Yeah, and don't forget me,’ Tails added. ‘I'm the second half of the code!’

‘How could I possibly forget you, my most brilliantly observant and tubularly audacious super-buddy? Let's go tap in a code or two. Way to go!!!’

## 9

# SQUADRON LEADER SONIC

Ten accurately positioned panel-bouncings later, after spelling out their names in code, Sonic and Tails waited expectantly. Nothing happened for a few seconds.

‘Uh-oh, I’m getting a freaky feeling about this,’ Tails lamented as he hovered underneath the ceiling. ‘I mean, we can’t plug ourselves in to that socket like the robot did.’

‘You could stick your tails into it!’ Sonic was bouncing happily off the walls and floor, waiting for something to happen.

‘Oh yeah, and have my most gorgeous feature singed off? No thanks. And I thought you were my buddy.’ Tails stopped speaking then, because the huge screen flickered and a message appeared in glowing green. The same words it showed were repeated by a deep voice from somewhere behind it.

‘Code accepted. Purpose of transaction?’

‘What does that mean?’ Sonic asked irritably. He was beginning to think the best thing to do was to try bouncing into the screen and breaking through it, if only to see what was on the other side.

‘PURPOSE OF TRANSACTION??’ the voice enquired again. This time it sounded faintly suspicious.

‘Um, um, um... *direct data access!*’ Tails squeaked at the top of his voice. The screen flickered blank and a secret panel to one side of it silently slid open.

Sonic was amazed. ‘How did you know that, most radically cool of all cool two-tailed foxes?’

‘I don’t know. It just sort of came to me. I think it’s something else I saw on a video once.’ Tails sniggered in a naturally cute manner.

‘Keep watching those videos, then, dude. Catch you later!’ Sonic leapt right through the open panel into the huge chamber on the other side.

Tails wasn't far behind him.



‘Groovy or what? Like, really far out.’ Tails was trying to take in the huge scale of the place they were inside — and failing. It looked like the whole of the Chemical Plant Zone without any of the Mega Mack which usually slimed them up and threatened to poison them. The place was filled with computer terminals, with one gigantic master system right in the centre.

Unfortunately, it was also full of Whisps.

‘Squadron Leader Sonic to wing pilot Tails! Hang ten, dude, it's wipe out time! Bandits at four o'clock, chocks away, knit me a scarf mother. What am I saying? Aw, let's just try... GERONIMO!!’

Sonic accelerated into a Super Spin and began blasting the Whisps, gliding and bouncing and soaring at incredible speed. He was soon leaving a trail of smashed robots behind. He still had a ring or two left, and he knew that gave him some protection against the Whisps. It was all over quicker than the time it took an Extra Large Hot'n'Spicy to vanish down a hungry hero-hedgehog's gullet. With a satisfied smirk, Sonic came to rest with his nose in Tails's bag, hunting for whatever food might be left.

‘Dude, I most definitely need this,’ he said, stuffing his face with nuts and crisps. ‘Wow, taking out all those Whisps sure gives me an appetite.’

‘What doesn't?’ replied Tails, looking around at all the computers. Somewhere, one of them held the location of Robotnik's new laboratory. But which one? How could they find out?

Sonic seemed almost to read his friend's mind. ‘The best way to find out, dude, is to start blasting them. I feel like a new hedgehog after that,’ Sonic added as he stuffed the last empty crisp packet back into the bag. ‘Trash them and we'll get what we're after. Trust me, dude. This is me you're talking to here, don't forget: Sonic the Hedgehog!’

Tails wanted to suggest a subtler approach, but Sonic was up and away before he could open his mouth to speak, spinning and leaping again, bouncing off terminals which sparked and whined and exploded as he slammed into and off them. Within seconds, the computer centre looked

like a large and very powerful bomb had exploded inside it. Fizzing electrical wires and bursting keyboards were everywhere, and among all the mayhem a spinning, blue supersonic hedgehog was having a real whale of a time. Whirling out of clouds of blue smoke, the grinning hedgehog called out to his friend.

‘Woah! Party on, people!!’

Sonic was too busy enjoying himself to spot what Tails could see on the screen of the large master computer. The words ‘MASTER DOWNLOAD’ appeared very briefly, and then endless lines began scrolling up on it, racing past at tremendous speed. Nuts! I'm never going to be able to remember all this, and it might be very important, Tails thought sadly as the information on the computer raced past his eyes. However...

Sonic was finally over the first flush of enthusiasm for how much fun this all was. He was beginning to see that the computer centre was filling up with smoke and crackling electrical cables. He could also see that some kind of defence system appeared to have been triggered. From the surface of the dome far above him, spiked balls on chains were descending and swinging through the air. It was all beginning to get just a bit too hectic. Staring above him, Sonic saw the exit panel in the dome, positioned right in the centre.

‘Dude! Dead centre! Up, up and away!’ Sonic launched himself at the dome.

Tails had finished his work. He flew right up, neatly dodging the flying spiked iron balls. Two of them crashed together right above his head, showering him with fragments of metal and spikes. He narrowly missed getting a radically fashionable new cyber razorcut hairdo as one ultra-sharp spike flew a few centimetres over his forehead.

‘Yikes!! Sonic, wait for me!’

The two of them flew out of the dome and found that the computer centre had been hidden inside a massive grassy-topped hillock. Now, however, was not the time to stand and admire the view; it was time to get away, and fast. Sonic had a feeling that Robotnik wouldn't be very happy about what they'd done to his computers. He might send a Egg-o-Matic to attack them, and Sonic preferred not to be around when that happened. He



hadn't found his friends yet, and that was what he really wanted to do. Dealing with Robotnik could come later. Then a miserable thought struck him.

‘Oh, no no no! We didn't get any information out of the master computer. Bummer to the max. Now what are we gonna do?’ Sonic looked at his feet in dismay.

‘The master computer was downloading the information on its screen. It was going by so fast that I couldn't read it. Not even a superfast dude such as yourself could have read it, Sonic.’ Tails looked unhappy, but his tail-tips were wagging ever so slightly.

Sonic should have realised that this was a dead giveaway, but he was too miserable to notice. He thought they had failed completely. ‘Which means we'll have to start all over again. Oh, what a most total bummer to the very max. I have been one dumb hedgehog.’

‘However,’ Tails smirked as he flourished his prize, ‘I did manage to video what was on the screen with our video camera! It's not just useful for taking on holidays, you know. Now all we have to do is to go home, plug it into the video player, put it on freeze frame and find out everything Robotnik had in that computer. Now is that megabrilliant or what?’

# 10

## TURNIP TOPS OR WHAT?

‘Look,’ Eggor said testily, ‘all you have to do is to press the lever only when the green light is on. Then you get pizza to eat. You don’t press the lever when the red light is on, because then you don’t get fed. Look, it’s really easy. I mean, someone with the brain of a shrimp could do it.’ Eggor sure as anything had a Scornfulness computer program installed in that metal head of his somewhere.

Sally had put her plan into operation. She figured that she could play for time by just refusing to do anything. That way, Robotnik couldn’t find out whatever it was he’d put them in their cages for. It seemed like a simple enough plan, and quite a good one too.

‘But I’m not a shrimp,’ Sally Acorn replied crossly. ‘I’m a squirrel. Even a robot with the brain of a rotten egg could see that.’ She stomped up and down her cage in mock-fury.

‘Stop being difficult,’ the eggsasperated robot yelled. ‘This is a very elementary part of the Behavioural Conditioning Program. It’s called Discriminative Learning.’

Sally was getting irritated with all these long words she couldn’t understand. She decided to try another line of conversation. ‘Anyway, what about your problem with metaphors?’

Eggor looked reflective just for a second. ‘I think I had some temporary minor problem with my Lexical Access Program,’ he said gruffly.

Sally hadn’t really been ready for an answer like that. Still trying to play for time, she attempted to keep Eggor talking.

‘What’s a Lecks Circle, er, that thing you mentioned, what is it then?’

‘It’s a kind of internal dictionary stored on my microchips. It tells me what things mean, how to get my grammar right, and how to speak correctly.’ Eggor didn’t sound especially bothered one way or the other whether he had one or not.

‘Gosh, that sounds useful. How much do they cost?’

‘You can only get one if you're a robot. And, of course, Dr Robotnik makes the very best Lexical Access Programs on all of Mobius. He's got the Mobius Prize for Advanced Linguistics, you know.’

‘Yes, I think we've talked about that already,’ Sally said, remembering the dead-end she had hit last time. ‘Well, anyway, why should I learn to press these levers correctly like you're telling me to?’

‘Because you won't get any food if you don't.’ Eggor was showing signs of being really irritable now. Irritable robots look rather peculiar. A little puff of steam was beginning to appear above some superheated coils on his back.

‘But if I don't get any food, I'll starve. If I starve, I won't be any use to Dr Robotnik in his experiments. So you have to give me food. Therefore, I don't have to press any levers because you'll feed me anyway. QED, yah boo sucks, and so there!’ Sally had spend some time thinking this one out while trying to stay awake. It seemed very logical. Unfortunately, Eggor had a reply ready.

‘Yes, we know that. Did you honestly believe that Dr Robotnik, the most brilliant scientist on Mobius, didn't think of that? Well, if you don't press the levers properly, we'll give you really horrible things to eat. Cabbage boiled for a week. Brussels sprouts all hard, and yellow in the middle. Boiled turnip tops with lumps of suet dumpling in that really icky kind of gravy, you know, the type you really hate. And we can also do this.’ Eggor smirked and flicked a switch on top of Sally's cage.

Sally Acorn sniffed. The smell which was wafting into the cage was scrumptious! Fresh, hot pizza and fries. It was so good she could almost imagine the melting cheese, bubbling just a bit, on top of the pizza. She could see the fries, golden brown, crispy and hot. She felt like her hand wanted to reach out for the salt. Her nose twitched and her tail bobbed, even though she tried to stop it. She didn't want Eggor to see that her resistance was cracking. Her eyes closed in pleasure just for a second, and when she opened them she shuddered in horror. Eggor had just put a tray of food into her cage. Well, ‘food’ it might have been but who wants to eat boiled turnip tops and root ends with chunks of mud still on them?

‘Now, are you going to be a good co-operative squirrel or what?’ Eggor gloated.

Sighing unhappily, Salley waited for the green light to come on, then pressed the lever in her cage.



It was after midnight when Robotnik came to the laboratory. Once again, Sally Acorn was just staying awake in her cage. She dozed off now and again, and she had to stifle her yawns and keep stretching to keep from going to sleep. After she'd pressed all the levers correctly, she'd got a good chunk or two of pizza and her stomach was full, which also made her sleepy. But she desperately wanted to hear what Robotnik was doing this all for. She especially wanted to know what the FAROUT machine was.

‘Well, Eggor? Is — ha ha ha! — Phase One complete?’

Sally shook herself out of her doze when she heard Robotnik's voice.

‘Yes, Master. They have all learned their lever-pressing tests.’ Eggor scanned through a huge sheaf of computer-print out.

‘Good, good, Eggor. Eggscellent, even. How many of them have you brain-scanned today?’ Sally heard the sound of footsteps as Robotnik paced up and down impatiently, followed by the random stumping of Eggor trying to stay alongside him.

‘Two more, Master. The penguin and the rabbit. Tomorrow I shall scan the brain of the squirrel called Sally Acorn. She is being difficult, master. I may need to use the Cyclotronic Encouragement Machine on her.’

Sally's blood ran cold. That sounded horrible!

‘We don't have time now!’ Robotnik's voice rose to a yell and he jumped up and down on the spot a couple of times. Little gobs of raw egg white fell from his white laboratory coat on to the floor. ‘That hateful and most wretched Sonic the Hedgehog has entered our Master Computer System in the Aquatic Ruin Zone. He may even have learned of the location of this, our secret laboratory!!’

Robotnik was beside himself with rage. It looked as if he was frothing at the mouth, but it was just bubbly raw egg white left over from his supper. It was, however, still totally gross and disgusting. He went on ranting and raving.

‘So, he will be here soon. We must activate all the defences, and we must have our first subject ready to go into the FAROUT machine at eight o'clock tomorrow morning!’

‘But, Master —’ protested Eggor.

‘No buts! This is a But-Free Zone!’ Robotnik screamed with fury.

‘Very good, Master. Who shall we choose for the subject of the first eggsperiment?’

Robotnik quietened down a bit. ‘Who did you say was being difficult?’

‘Sally Acorn the squirrel, Master.’

‘Then we shall use HER! Yes — ha ha ha! — the squirrel will go first.’

‘Master, we haven't done any brain scans with her. The FAROUT machine must have brain-scan information to be able to —’

Robotnik started to shake with rage. Well, not so much shake as wobble, really, because after all he was very, very fat. His enormous stomach seemed to quiver up and down as he screamed at Eggor, covering the robot's face with little spat-out gobbets of raw egg white.

‘How DARE you tell ME what the machine needs? I INVENTED it, you useless piece of scrap metal! We will use the Transmogrification Ray to change her molecular structure, and see if our experiments have been a success. If it works, we know that we can finish that ridiculous Sonic the Hedgehog forever! FOREVER!! Haaa-haaa-haaa-haaa-haaaaa!’ Robotnik's speech tailed off into hysterical, insane laughter. Talk about two test-tubes short of a laboratory! With a final sweep of his arms, he raced out of the laboratory, his laughter echoing down the corridor outside.

Sally felt alone, and very scared. They were going to do something unbelievably horrid to her in the morning, she knew it. She couldn't sleep,

and after a couple of hours of tossing and turning she thought that she might as well have a decent meal beforehand. Waiting for the green light to come on, she pressed sadly at the lever to her cage.

No pizza arrived.

She rattled the bars of her cage angrily, but Eggor was already standing there beside it. Sally Acorn gave a little shriek of surprise.

‘There isn't any pizza during the hours when you should be asleep. And you should be asleep, you know. It's very naughty to be awake at this time of night.’ Eggor had that rotten schoolmaster tone to his voice again.

‘You're going to do something horrible to me in the morning! I know, I heard you! With that awful machine. I just wanted a last piece of pizza first.’

To her great surprise, Eggor's face changed. He seemed to look sad, and then he turned his face away from the cage.

‘It won't hurt,’ he mumbled. ‘Really it won't. It'll all be over very quickly. Oh dear. Oh dear.’ The robot assistant shuffled off across the laboratory and walked through the open doors. It wasn't long before he was back with a slice of fresh pizza, which he slipped through the bars into Sally's cage. He didn't say anything, but just clanked back off to his desk to stare into the computer there.

Sally scoffed her pizza hungrily. There's something rather weird about that robot, she thought, and not for the first time either. She tried desperately to think of some way to escape, but there really didn't seem to be any way out. The cages were very strong. Racking her brains, she began to doze, and fell into a deep sleep.

She didn't wake up until eight o'clock...

# 11

## SERIOUS MONKEY BUSINESS

‘It's no good. I can't make head or tails of this,’ Tails said sadly. ‘It's all gibberish to me.’

‘Well, don't look at me. I may well be the world's fastest megadude but I can't understand computer codes either. That's for nerdy guys with glasses and pockets full of ballpens to deal with while I do all the really exciting and glamorous heroic stuff.’

‘What can it possibly mean?’ Tails lamented, squinting up his eyes and trying to make his brain work harder. That just gave him a headache.

‘Tails, it's time for a raid on the Metropolis. That's where Robotnik has his master laboratory, after all. There must be information there about where his new laboratory is; all we have to do is find it.’

‘But that's exactly what he'll expect us to do. So he'll have lots of awful traps and grotty robots everywhere. And then we'll have to fight past them all over again when we do find out where the other laboratory is. And that'll take lots of time, and our friends are in danger. I'm worried about them. Crikey, I really miss Porker, you know? And Tux. And Johnny. And Sally, and all the others.’

‘I know, little dude. I know.’

The two friends looked sadly at each other. They knew something had to be done, but they didn't know just what. Then Sonic suddenly brightened up.

‘Hey! Put a hold on all that despair and misery just one second, dudelet. We can take all this to Mickey the Monkey!’

Tails wasn't sure he'd even heard of Mickey the Monkey, but he was eager for any plan that would help them find their friends. ‘Who's he? Where does he live? How can he help us? Tell me, tell me!’

‘Whoa there boy! Hold on. Too many questions all at once. Bring that camera and let's head off back down to the Emerald Hill Zone, dude. Or me old china, I should say. Be careful with Mickey. He's kind of behind the times on cool speaking, if you know what I mean. But he thinks he's radically cool, which can be a problem sometimes. Oh, and we'll need one absolutely humungous heap of peanuts.’

‘But the monkeys of Emerald Hill Zone can be dangerous! Or mischievous! Or just generally really 'orrible!’

‘Not Mickey. He's a friend. And you know what they say: any friend of Sonic the Hedgehog is, well, you know the sort of thing. Now gather up two tons of peanuts and nachos and let's go.’

‘I thought you said he only wanted peanuts?’

‘The nachos are for us, stupid. I don't know about you, but all this hero stuff is playing havoc with my regular eating habits. Now let's ship on out!’



Second time around, Tails and Sonic didn't have to worry so much about the Coconuts lurking in the trees, since they'd blasted most of them on their first visit. However, Tails wasn't entirely prepared for a serious culture shock when one of the few monkeys Sonic knew and trusted leapt out at them with a cry of ‘Ello my old cock sparrer, how's it hanging then, eh?’

‘Sonic, people stopped saying things like that years and years ago. It's awful!’ Tails whispered into his friend's ear.

‘Shut up and give Mickey the film. It's part of his culture; besides, it goes over great with the tourists.’ Tails complied quietly. The monkey set off at a brisk pace and the two heroes followed. Tails kept shooting him strange looks, or at least he did until a sharp elbow in the ribs from Sonic alerted him to his friend's displeasure. Tails was very surprised when, in the middle of the swaying palm trees ringing the tropical bay of the Zone, Mickey retreated into a palm-frond beach hut and sat himself down before a whole bunch of computers and consoles.



‘But, but — how come there's electricity in the Emerald Hill Zone?’ Tails was curious. Mickey the Monkey's paws were flying across the keyboard almost as fast as Sonic could run.

‘Well, Whelks, me old mucker, see my man there,’ he said, pointing to another of the monkey's of the Zone, ‘he's just gone dahn the frog a bit and laid a power cable to one of Robotnik's terminals, and we run off the juice. So come on, give us a decko at what you got here. Let the dog see the rabbit!’ Mickey plugged some jacks into sockets, some more jacks into other sockets, realised that trying to plug one jack into another one wouldn't work, and settled down to check the screen.

‘Sonic!’ hissed Tails as discreetly as he could manage in the cramped hut. ‘He's a monkey not a dog and why's he talking about rabbits and frogs, and why does he call me Whelks when everyone knows I'm Miles Prower or Tails to my friends? Why, Sonic, eh? Why?’

‘Shhh,’ Sonic shushed. ‘Most of it is just his colourfully old-fashioned authentic Emerald Hill Zone way of speaking. Some of it is rhyming slang, like this: frog, frog and electrode — road! He's calling you after whelks and whales — Tails!’ Sonic explained.

Tails looked dubious. ‘That's a bit daft,’ he whispered in the hedgehog's ear. ‘How does anyone know which thing he's rhyming with? I mean, it could be anything. It could be frog and tonic — Sonic! Besides, wouldn't it be better as something like whelks and snails?’

‘Shhhh,’ Sonic shushed again.

‘Well then!’ Mickey said at last. ‘I reckon I'm going to have to give this a really good seeing to, don't you know.’

Tails looked up at Mickey, who was displaying his talent for eating peanuts faster even than Sonic could.

‘Well, it's all here!’ The monkey jumped up in pleasure. ‘Come here, Whelks, me old mate, put it there, why don't you?’

Tails was somewhat uncertain about what exactly he should be putting where, and why, but eventually he realised that Mickey just wanted to shake his hand for a bit. Apparently he had had some success at cracking the unit.

‘Well, this is how the old chump coded it. All the code numbers refer to the terminals Ro-you-know-who has stuck all over the shop, all around Mobius. Once you sort out the order, it's a real piece of cake. So, that's the good news.’

‘What's the bad news?’ said Sonic, his ears having pricked up at the mention of cake.

‘Well, not wanting to beat around the bush, the bad news is that his secret laboratory is in the Scrap Brain Zone.’

Tails groaned. He knew that the Scrap Brain Zone was one of the most hideously dangerous on all of Mobius. It was totally mechanical, which meant lots of traps and Robotnik's robot creations lurking around every corner. Worse, since it was entirely made of metal and glass, it would be very difficult to find safe places to duck, dodge and hide out there.

‘Never mind, Tails.’ Sonic seemed to sense his friend's misgivings. ‘We'll only have to fight our way past the electrical shockers, buzzsaws, swinging spike balls, crushing pounders, flame jets, spring pads and endless gross-to-the-max robot guards.’

‘Don't you forget all the mechanical malarkey like the elevators, falling blocks, and all the rest of it, Sonic. Strike a light, you wouldn't want your little chum there to think it was going to be easy.’

‘Thanks, Mickey. That makes us both feel radically good.’

‘Glad to hear it. So I suppose you gents will be wanting the *really* bad news now, I'll warrant.’

‘Oh great,’ Sonic groaned. ‘Go on, like, thrill us to the core, Mickey. What's the *really* bad news, dude-matey?’

‘Well, the *really* bad news is — No.’ Mickey put his paws over his eyes. ‘I can't bring myself to tell you, what with you being real toffs and that. I mean, I like you gents, and it would be awfully cruel to tell you what's really going over down in the Old Scrap End, as my dear old mother would call it. So I just can't, mate. Well, not until I get some more peanuts anyroad. And some of those tortilla chips. And maybe just a packet or two of —’

Sonic handed Tails's bag over with a scowl on his face. 'What a rip-off. Go on, stuff your face. Now, WHAT IS THE *REALLY* BAD NEWS?'

'Well, the *really* bad news is — it's my birthday, and you chumps ain't brought me a special present and now I'm going to sit and cry and make you feel guilty, just you see if I don't.' Mickey put his face in his paws again and started to snigger. Fortunately, he stopped before Sonic gave him a superspin kick which would have sent him flying higher than the tops of the palm trees outside.

'No, me old blue matey, there is something you should know about. You-know-who has got some kind of secret weapon get-up in this new laboratory of his. At least, I think that's what it is. There are several references to something called FAROUT. Looks to these plates like a new experimental — I mean, eggsperimental — weapon, sure as eggs is eggs. Now, there's some garbled rubbish after that, so I'm not sure what's really occurring, but there are the monickers of some of your friends in here. And here is the last line I could read. Have a decko at that!'

Mickey flicked a key on the keyboard and up flashed three little words.

*SONIC THE TOASTER.*

Sonic and Tails stared at the screen. Then they stared at each other. Then they stared at Mickey. Then they stared at their own feet. Finally, having run out of places to stare, Tails said simply, 'Sonic the *Toaster*? What can it mean?'

'I don't know, little dude, but I do know one thing. My back is for supporting the coolest spikes ever seen on the planet, not for popping up slices of bread. Brown, white, or wholemeal.'

'Like I told you gents, it could just have been something scrambled up in the file. A scrambled eggsperiment! Ha ha!' Mickey's cheery snigger was cut short. Sonic and Tails just weren't in the mood for it.

'Oh come on, guys, give us a smile! After all, you stole the information. I could even say it was a poached eggsperiment.'

'Mickey, thank you for what you've done for us,' Tails said irritably, 'but, dude, you do not talk cool.'

‘You what? You mean my giving it a little bit of this, a little bit of that, all the old how's your father and such like?’

Tails cringed. ‘Don't you ever think you might be, um, well, a little bit behind the times, Mickey?’

‘Allow me to let you into a secret, my old china. Let me whisper in your shell-like,’ replied the monkey, leaning over to whisper in Tails's ear. ‘It's actually what we educated monkeys call a Subcultural Sociolinguistic Dialect Variation. Now, can you say that and chew peanuts at the same time?’ Mickey flipped a peanut over, round, and back underneath his tongue with his mouth open. It was marginally gross, but Tails had to admit that it was quite a talent nonetheless.

The fox grinned. ‘No, my old mucker, may I be struck down by a Number 8 bus but I reckon I can't. Thanks, Mickey. We've got a lot of friends who may end up being very grateful to you.’

‘Let's hope so, sunshine, let's hope so. But watch your spiky friend there. If he starts popping up hot waffles or slices of toast, you could be in more trouble than a barrel load of monkeys and no mistake!’

# **12**

## **DR ROBOTNIK EGGSPLAINS ALL**

Robotnik was in a serious mood this morning. Anyone could tell that, because he had a new freshly starched white laboratory coat on. It was one of the special ones he wore for really important eggsperiments, the ones with the big R on the right pocket over his chest. The coat had so much starch on it that it almost crackled as the evil scientist strode into the animal laboratory. It was exactly eight o'clock in the morning. Dr Ivo Robotnik was never a second early nor a second late. He even cleaned his teeth and went to the bathroom at exactly the same times, every day. But just for once this morning was slightly different than usual. Today, Ivo Robotnik would bring his greatest eggsperiment to completion! Ha ha ha! Today, Ivo Robotnik would at last have the weapon which would finally allow him to rule all of Mobius! That eggsasperating Sonic the Hedgehog would be doomed after the FAROUT machine was perfected. He cackled with glee and rubbed his hands together. They were only a little bit sticky from egg white this morning.

‘Eggor, it is time! Bring out the squirrel Sally Acorn from her cage for a final eggsamination.’

‘Master, she has a high temperature. I think she has been pressing levers too often and there was a fault with the machinery.’ Eggor cringed.

‘A fault with the machinery?’ Robotnik eggsclaimed loudly.

‘Yes, the food delivery system was overactive and she ate too much pizza. Of course, I have corrected the problem with all due speed. But she isn't well,’ Eggor eggsplained. ‘So I suggest we use Johnny Lightfoot the rabbit instead. We have full brain-scan information on him. It didn't take too long to collect.’

‘How dare you!’ cried an insulted rabbit. Eggor silenced his angry rejoinder by opening his cage and drawing out the struggling Johnny.

Sally Acorn, who had only woken when Robotnik entered, was very confused. She wasn't unwell at all. She was a bit sleepy still, but she knew Eggor was making up his story to Robotnik. Why? Her confusion, however, was quickly overcome by her fear of what was about to happen to Johnny.

‘Let him go, you monsters! What are you going to do to him?’

Robotnik screamed with glee. His horrible, mad laughter made all of the prisoners hold their ears to shut out the noise. When he finally calmed down, he threw his arms wide open and said, ‘Well, friends of that most hateful enemy of mine, Sonic the Hedgehog’ — at which everyone in the room cheered — ‘I, the most brilliant mind on Mobius, the greatly distinguished and eggstraordinarily brilliant Dr Ivo Robotnik’ — at which everyone hissed — ‘have finally built the weapon to destroy him completely. But before he gets his once and for all, I am going to test it on you! I shall now give you a short eggsegesis of my theory.’

‘What's an eggsejer-thingy?’ asked Johnny Lightfoot.

‘It's a critical examination or interpretation of a text or theory,’ explained Robotnik helpfully. ‘Now shut up. Since, of course, my theory is so brilliant that no one could possibly criticise it, an eggsegesis in this instance means that I shall interpret it for you. Keeping in mind that you are far, far less intelligent than I am.’

Tux the Penguin hissed half-heartedly. Like everyone else, he wanted to hear what Robotnik was about to say.

‘The FAROUT machine is the Fabulously Advanced Robotnik's Original Universal Transmogri-fier. Using the FAROUT machine, I can egg-schange your molecules around and change you into quite different objects and forms. Egg-scuse me if I use scientific language too difficult for you to understand. I shall try to keep my egg-sposition short, because I know you only have egg-stremely small brains.’

‘We can understand you, you rotten evil —’ Sally began, her stomach turned by the constant barrage of unfunny egg puns, but Robotnik cut her reply short.

‘Shut up,’ snapped Robotnik. ‘Previously, I captured you and kept you inside Prison Eggs. I knew that your friend,’ he spat out the words,

‘that hateful hedgehog would try to rescue you. Due to a minor problem with computer processing of scientific information, a little ineeggsactitude here and there, he succeeded.

‘This time, however, his fate is sealed. This time, he will come to rescue you. But he will not be able to find you, because I will have transmogrified you! He will never even know what you have been turned into, after my eggsemplary eggssperiment. So he will run around, forever trying to find you and failing, and eventually he will run out of speed. He will eggspire! Then I shall capture him at last and transmogrify him so that he can never threaten Dr Ivo Robotnik's plans for world conquest again! When that is done, I shall crown myself King Robotnik. Or perhaps Emperor Robotnik. Which would be better, do you think?’

‘How about Ratfink Robotnik?’ Joe Sushi's growling voice piped up.

Robotnik's face went red and then purple with rage. For a short and wonderful moment, Sally Acorn thought he was going to eggspplode.

‘You will find yourself *eggs-terminated* instead of transmogrified if you dare to say such a thing to the greatest mind this plant has ever known! Eggor, put that rabbit into the FAROUT machine!’

Eggor unclipped the catches to a thick steel porthole, all the while holding a desperately struggling Johnny Lightfoot in his other metallic arm. He stuffed the rabbit through the open porthole and shut and sealed it up swiftly, leaving only the ghost of Johnny's final ‘*Yikes!!!*’ floating on the air. Sally and the others were too stunned to cry out in anger, and too horribly fascinated and afraid of what might happen next.

‘Eggspose the rabbit to the Molecular Eggschangement Ray!’ Robotnik's voice had risen to a scream again.

Eggor twiddled two dials on the left side of the machine. As he did so, great one-way mirrors at the far end of the laboratory slid away from each other to reveal the huge FAROUT machine which had been hidden behind them. It looked like a gigantic circus cannon, with a barrel at least ten metres long. A loud, deep humming began to fill the laboratory, and the long, smooth barrel of the machine glowed bright green. Robotnik's demented screams only just rose above the horrible, grinding sound which followed it. Most of the animals were holding their ears, trying to keep out the grungy noise, but Sally forced herself to keep watching and hearing

everything that happened. If they were to have any hope of escape, she would need to learn all she could about everything in the laboratory.

‘Make sure you keep reading the Eggsposure Meter, Eggor!’ Robotnik howled. The laboratory was filled with noise now, and the dials on Eggor's control panel were reaching the red Danger zone.

‘Eggstrude the test subject!’ Robotnik cried eggsultantly. For a split-second the laboratory was plunged into darkness. Only the flickering lights on the control panels of the FAROUT machine, and the weird ghostly green glow of the steel tube, were visible. Then, the lights suddenly came back on with a full glare and intensity, forcing Sally to cover her eyes for a moment.

There was a horrible plopping sound from the FAROUT machine as something was deposited from the far end of it. What had gone into the machine was most definitely Johnny Lightfoot the rabbit. What had emerged from it was something entirely different.

Sally Acorn gazed at the scene with utter horror and revulsion, for Johnny Lightfoot had been turned into a... Well, you'll just have to wait and see, won't you? (Stop that booing at the back; it isn't polite.)



# 13

## RAID ON SCRAP BRAIN ZONE

‘Sonic, this place is really horrible!’ Tails's complaint had some real justification. Scrap Brain Zone was ghastly. It was where Robotnik dumped all the junk from his failed eggsperiments. Even trying to walk through it was hard going. Rusting, broken robots lay all over the place. It looked as though Robotnik must have had a great many failed experiments lately, because there were an awful lot of rusty robots lying around.

Sonic's eyes were bright. He was looking left, looking right, in front of and behind him all at the same time (well, almost at the same time). He knew Robotnik would be expecting them, and that meant traps. But the first one was a real surprise.

‘Look at that one! What a mess! Crikey, it must have been ginormous,’ Tails said wonderingly as he gazed up at the rusted shell of a really huge robot which lay in their path. It looked like the remains of an Egg-o-Matic with a huge stinger mounted on each side of it.

‘Don't get too close, dude,’ Sonic advised. ‘You never know what —’

Sonic's warning was just a little too late. The shell of the broken robot burst apart and a pair of Crawlers raced out with their antennae twitching. Their barbed claws lunged at Tails, who leapt back with an instinctive ‘Yipes!’ But he wasn't fast enough.

‘Hold on buddy, I'm coming,’ Sonic yelled as he raced up to full Super Spin speed. One of the Crawlers had grabbed the tip of one of his friend's tails and, hard as Tails was struggling, he couldn't get free. The other Crawler was advancing with its claws going *snick-snick-snick*, plainly preparing to cut off a tail or two!

Sonic bounced off the advancing Crawler and leapt into the air. Just as it fell into a thousand pieces he turned a perfect spinning somersault in mid-air and landed feet-first on the second robot, breaking its casing apart and freeing Tails from its iron grip.

Sonic frowned down at his young companion. Being a hero sometimes carried with it some serious responsibilities. ‘Phew, that was close! And we aren't even near the laboratory yet. Be careful, dude. Don't check out any rusting ruins too closely.’

Tails didn't need telling twice. Being very careful indeed, he followed his friend up the hill towards the gleaming metal and glass building in the distance. That had to be Robotnik's new laboratory, and all the traps and robots inside it didn't bear thinking about. But their friends were imprisoned inside and, well, they had to do what they had to do.



‘So the eggsperiment was not entirely successful, Master.’ Eggor looked worried; Robotnik was a great one for flying off the handle when things went wrong, which often meant that Eggor's head flew off his shoulders.

‘No, Eggor. That is because it was what we— ha ha ha! — Great, Brilliant Scientific Geniuses call a “pilot study”.’

‘But, um, what did our eggsperiment have to do with flying, Master?’

Robotnik's face twitched just a little. ‘Nothing, you stupid robot. A pilot study is a first test. A trial run. An initial attempt. Allowing us to eggstrapolate the findings to later eggsperiments.’

‘Oh.’

‘The problem, I think, is that the subject of the eggsperiment did not have a very advanced brain. That is why we could not turn him into a complicated machine. That will come later, in other eggsperiments. Indeed, perhaps we should not be over-ambitious to begin with.’

‘But we didn't turn him into even a very simple little machine, Master.’

Robotnik's face began to quiver with rage. Eggor's control system switched to Cower mode. ‘And whose fault was THAT? We should have used the squirrel after all. Now we shall have to wait for the Transmogrification Ray to recharge. We will be able to test it on her

tomorrow. Ha ha ha! Then we shall have eggstra information, and we shall transmogrify ALL those miserable creatures! Ha ha ha ha!

He stumped off to his office for lunch. 'And don't forget to clean the corridor, Eggor!' he yelled behind him, leaving a little trail of egg white as he went.

Eggor clanked back to the laboratory and picked up the bucket and mop. It was a funny-looking mop. It had the usual thick mop's head, but there were two especially long, thick strands on it. Likewise, the handle had a funny, slightly bobbed protuberance at the far end which looked just a little bit like a stumpy tail...



'Oh, gross!' Porker Lewis was really distressed. 'I can't believe it. That robot is cleaning and polishing the floor with Johnny Lightfoot!'

'With what used to be Johnny Lightfoot,' Joe Sushi replied glumly.

They were all quiet for a few moments. None of them wanted to voice the question they all had in their minds. Eventually, though, Sally did.

'What do you think we'll get turned into then?'

'Dunno,' Tux the penguin muttered. 'I suppose if he wants a full set someone's going to have to be the bucket, and someone else the scrubbing brush.' He shuddered and tried to smooth his ruffled feathers. 'Oh, it's too awful to think about.'

'But I don't think Robotnik was entirely pleased with his experiment,' Porker Lewis wondered out loud. 'I heard him arguing with Eggor rather crossly just now.'

'He always does that. I almost feel sorry for that robot.' Sally surprised her friends by saying that. She even surprised herself. Eggor was just a big stupid lump of metal, after all.

'And I'm afraid I heard that they're going to transmi-groofy us, or whatever they call it, tomorrow. They have to recharge some batteries or something. I thought you ought to know.' Porker's information left them all quiet and pensive for a few more moments.

‘I wonder if, um, I wonder if there's anything of Johnny left? Do you think his mind is, well... inside that mop?’ Joe Sushi had been wondering what it must be like to have your mind stuck inside a floor-cleaning tool.

Sally thought about that for a moment. ‘I suppose it must be. Otherwise, surely they wouldn't have scanned our brains, would they?’

Again, the animals were quiet for a few moments, thinking this over.

‘Do you think it would be better to have your mind left intact inside a mop? I mean, what does it feel like when they clean the floor with you?’ Tux wondered aloud.

‘I don't think I want to think about that,’ Porker growled, annoyed with himself for doing just that. ‘But come tomorrow, I dare say we're going to find out for ourselves.

‘Unless Sonic gets here in time.’



‘This is the entrance door,’ Sonic said unnecessarily. After all, the smooth steel-plated hatch did have the words ‘DR ROBOTNIK'S LABORATORY: KEEP OUT!’ in red painted letters as tall as Sonic himself. He and Tails had managed to race past the Whisps hovering in the distance, but they could hear their buzzing getting louder by the second. It was plain that they didn't have much time.

‘Well, here goes,’ breathed Sonic as he pushed the glowing red panel on the side of the door. To his surprise, the door swished open at once.

‘Crikey, that's lucky!’ Tails grinned.

‘No way, Tails. It means that Dr Robotnik is expecting us. Be, like, on your guard to the max, my little foxy dude. So move up to max racing speed and let's spin and fly it!’

Tails sprinted into a super dash as they sped along the winding corridor behind the door. Red lights were flashing along the ceiling and they thought they could hear the *Whoo-whoo-whoo* of an alarm sounding somewhere deep inside the building.

Tails was almost disappointed by the guards in front of the next doorway. There were just a pair of Crawlers, and Tails and Sonic stomped

them easily. The robots were slow, much too slow to stop a superspeeding pair of radically heroic dudes on a desperate rescue mission. Sonic somersaulted into the red panel beside the door beyond the robots, which lit up brilliantly and caused the door to slide open as easily as the entrance hatch had.

‘Replay time, dude!’ Sonic was in full spin mode, bouncing into the huge chamber behind the door. He wasn't expecting what confronted him there.

The place looked like an assembly line in a factory. There were rows and rows of small metal cages with iron bars on each side. Each one had some kind of metal wheel inside it, and what looked suspiciously like a feeding tray and a water bottle attached to the outside of each cage. Sonic had a very bad feeling about this.

‘These look like animal cages,’ he growled. ‘Bogus or what?’ He realised that Robotnik probably had his friends trapped in miserable little cages just like these. And since there were dozens of them here, it looked like that infernal Robotnik was planning to capture every other creature on Mobius too.

But destroying them wasn't going to be easy. For one thing, there was a huge array of worker robots assembling the cages to be dealt with. For another, there were maybe thirty Whisps angrily buzzing and swarming. They were bunching together, getting ready to strike down at Sonic and Tails in squadron formation.

Sonic and Tails were really determined, though; hey, they are heroes after all! This wasn't just for their own sakes. All their friends, and every creature on Mobius, needed them to fight their way through. With a public like that, what could Sonic and Tails do but give their all? Bouncing, spinning, leaping, crashing into Whisps, the assembly plant was soon showered with fragments of blasted Whisp. The assembly robots, though, just went on automatically with their work.

You've never seen a hedgehog and a fox demolish so many robots so fast. Never in, like, superdude history was so much owed by so many to so few. Yet, when all the Whisps had been crashed, blasted and bounced into scrap metal, the assembly robots *still* just went right on working away, clipping bottles to cages and installing the exercise wheels.

‘We've got to get further in! We've got to find the computer system that controls all this!’ Sonic yelled to his foxy pal. Rushing through the factory line into a corridor beyond, he looked frantically around as Tails raced right up behind him. There were two doors here: a very heavy bolted steel door far in the distance and one rather closer to the right. The nearer one had a funny yellow and black symbol and the words ‘RECHARGING PLANT - KEEP OUT!’ on it.

Sonic accelerated again, going so fast his sneakers almost left a trail of smoke behind him. He bounced the heavy door in the distance as fast as he could, and bounced right round the walls and into the door again. It didn't budge at all. There just wasn't any way in through there. Which left only one thing to do. Grim-faced, Sonic hurtled towards the other door.

‘Sonic, do you think this is such a good ide—’

*KERRASHH!* The door to the Recharging Plant suddenly had a distinctly hedgehog-sized hole in it. Tails clambered through and saw to his dismay that Sonic almost seemed to be out of control. He was bouncing and spinning crazily off ceiling, walls, and floor and he didn't seem to find it possible to slow down.

To his absolute horror, Tails could see that Sonic was heading right for a lever which had a big sign over it which read: ‘DO NOT TOUCH THIS UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES WHILE THE FAROUT MACHINE IS RECHARGING. EGGSTREME DANGER!!!’

Tails tried to dive between Sonic and the lever to stop him hitting it, but he was just a split-second too late. Sonic slammed into the lever, which snapped upwards.

Immediately, everything changed. Brilliant lights glared all around Tails, and then he saw Sonic bathed in a brilliant green ray of light. Both of them were thrown into crazy, wild spins, over and over, unable to control their motion. Frantic alarm bells and buzzers were causing a terrific din all around them. Then there was a *very* weird noise, a sort of huge slurp combined with the noise people make when they suck their cheeks in really hard, and all the light around got sucked into a single green point right in front of Tails's eyes.

Then he blacked out.

# 14

## SQUIRREL BUST OUT!

‘So, tomorrow you're going to turn me into a household utensil. Are you going to clean the floor with me too?’ Sally sniffed miserably. Eggor looked faintly embarrassed — well, as embarrassed as a robot can look.

‘No, I don't think so. I think you'll make something rather better than a mop.’ Eggor seemed to be trying to be reassuring.

‘But I'm happy being a squirrel!’ Sally reasoned.

‘But that's not the point. You and your friends cause nice Dr Robotnik a lot of trouble. When you have all been transmogrified, you will all lead much more productive lives and Dr Robotnik will be able to rule Mobius without you always getting in the way of his plans.’

‘Not while Sonic and Tails are still free he won't!’

‘Yes, but they will be next. You and your friends are the test runs, you see, to check whether the FAROUT machine will be able to deal with the others. Now, Dr Robotnik has enough scientific data to be sure that he will be able to transmogrify Sonic and Tails as well. And then everyone will live happily ever after under Dr Robotnik's enlightened rule.’ Eggor was plainly running an Extreme Loyalty program.

‘But they won't be happy! Do you think Johnny is happy? How would you like to be something people cleaned floors with? We were happy before you caught us and locked us up in these wretched cages!’ Sally wailed through the bars.

Eggor was silent at this for a minute or two. ‘Well, it's all for the greater good, you know,’ he replied finally.

‘Oh really? So Emperor Robotnik can poison the seas with his foul oil plants? Pollute all the air and water with the mess from his horrible factories? That's the greater good, is it?’

‘Look, I'm a robot. I am not programmed to discuss environmental issues.’ Eggor sounded defensive. ‘However, I do improve the

environment in my own way.'

'Oh yeah? How?'

'Well, I'm just about to clean your smelly cage out for a start.'

Sally was very insulted. Her cage was immaculately clean and she washed at least three times a day in the water from the dropper clipped to the outside of it 'It doesn't need cleaning! Go away, you horrible robot. I hope Robotnik transmogger-whatever-it-is... I hope he changes you into something miserable. Like a brush for the bathroom.' She burst into tears.

Rather stiffly, Eggor lifted out the bars on one side of Sally's cage and stuck a feather duster into it. He gave the inside a few token swishings with the duster and was about to clip the bars back on when utter mayhem broke out. Shrill alarms rang out everywhere, the lights turned from normal to green, and then to red, and then back again. Robotnik raced into the laboratory. He looked like a huge, wobbling yo-yo and he screamed at Eggor.

'To the master control system AT ONCE! That wretched hedgehog is here and this time we're going to capture him! Ha ha!'

Eggor turned and clanked across the laboratory as fast as he could move. Robotnik was frantically twiddling dials and levers on a huge computer panel next to the FAROUT machine.

'Look, Eggor! He is in the assembly plant. Now, he's outside and all we have to do is to raise the security door to the Transmogrification Entrapment Chamber and we can hold him there until tomorrow when the FAROUT machine will be recharged!' With a flourish, Robotnik pulled a lever down.

Nothing happened.

'No! No! NOOOOOO! The door is stuck! Eggor, activate manual over-ride!' Robotnik was wobbling up and down now, a furious eggsspression on his face. Eggor was just a little too late reaching for the lever.

'Oh no! NOOOOOO! He's got into the Recharging Room! He's going to —'



And there we must leave matters for a moment. What do you mean ‘Oh no, not again!’? Go on, off you go, have a look at what Sally has been up to while this diversion has been going on.



Sally Acorn slipped the grille off the front of the air-conditioning duct. Fortunately, the bolts were loose and she was easily able to slip into the square metal chute and clip the grille back into place behind her. With Robotnik and Eggor so preoccupied by the emergency, it had been easy to sneak very quietly out of her cage after Eggor had left the bars on the floor. She didn't feel very good about leaving her friends behind, but she wasn't strong enough to take the bars off their cages and the noise might have alerted Eggor in any case.

Now she was on her own. Somewhere in this awful place, Sonic and Tails were fighting against Robotnik's evil minions. She only hoped that she could find them in time. Turning tail, she skittered along the duct, trying to figure out just where she was. She didn't have any idea really, but what really mattered was that she was free!



When Tails came around, he was alone. He was spinning and drifting through the air, and bouncing off strange star shaped objects. Oh great, he thought, I'm in a Warp of Confusion. I've no idea how I got here, nor how to get out. I'm in a right old pickle and no mistake. And where on Mobius is Sonic?

Struggling as he drifted around, Tails felt utterly lost without his friend. He held his face in his furry paws as the awful thought occurred to him that Sonic might have been captured by Robotnik after all. He might even have been destroyed! No, that was too terrible even to think about. Tails shut his eyes tight and just hoped for the best.



‘This will put our eggsperiment back for days!’ Robotnik screamed furiously. ‘That wretched animal has destroyed the Recharging Batteries.

Now we shall have to build new ones! How eggsasperating!’

‘But, Master, work is nearly completed on the reserve batteries. You asked me to have it finished tomorrow, and the work has been done on time, Master. And the hedgehog has been eggstruded from the building.’ Eggor looked just a little pleased with himself for a second. Robotnik's expression changed completely.

‘Eggscellent! You are a most splendid robot, Eggor. Ha ha! When we have captured Sonic and analysed his brain, and I have learned the secret of his amazing speed, I shall build a Supersonic Processor for your control systems and upgrade you to a Mark II Eggor!’

‘It's nothing, Master.’ Eggor smirked slightly. ‘Eggor is merely a pawn in the great scheme of things. It is a privilege to serve you, Master.’

‘Well, of course it is, good robot. How very true. I think I shall have an extra egg for supper today. Ha ha ha!’ Robotnik looked around him with a satisfied air of smugness.

Then he saw the open cage.



Tails felt like he had been spinning around for hours. Finally, there was another strange *Whooooosshhhh* sound and he landed flat on his back in the sand. There was a warm breeze in the air, and he could smell the salty tang of the sea. Looking up, trying to get his eyes to focus properly, he saw to his surprise waving palm fronds and a monkey. The monkey was grinning, and starting to gather up the contents of Tails's bag, which had scattered all over the beach.

Mickey was really happy with the crisps and peanuts, but there was something unusual lying in the sand which he poked with a puzzled finger. It was nicely chrome-plated metal, gleaming in the sunlight. It had two slots in the top and a lever at the side with a dial which went from ‘Slightly Brownded’ to ‘Very Well Done’. It was blue, mostly, but at the base it had two long red lines of something like plastic.

‘Uh oh. You know what, my old sausage, I'm getting a really naff feeling about this and no mistake.’

Tails looked over at the device Mickey was pointing at, and groaned more groaningly than he'd ever groaned in his whole life. Well, that's really all you can do when you find out that your best friend in all of Mobius has been transmogrified into a toaster.

# **15**

## **LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE: HE MAKES GREAT WAFFLES!**

‘Gorblimey, mate, look on the bright side. He don't half make great waffles.’ Mickey slurped the last juicy fragment of thoroughly delicious waffle up from his plate with his buttery paws and licked his plate in a thoroughly ill-mannered fashion.

Tails was appalled. He'd just been lying in the cool shade of the biggest palm tree he could find, trying to figure out what on Mobius he was going to do. Now he had returned, only to find that Mickey had been using his best friend to make brunch!

‘How could you?’ he complained bitterly. ‘The future of the planet depends on Sonic, and you're using him as a toaster!’

‘Well, we might as well. It's what he would have wanted, ain't it? I mean, do you just want to keep him lying around, doing nothing at all?’

‘Well, no, but —’

‘Well, there you are then. Wotcha waiting for, eh? Fancy a waffle?’

‘Weeeelllll...’

Mickey popped four waffles into the toaster and turned the dial to ‘Fairly Well Done’. He offered Tails some opinions.

‘Doesn't look like it's going to be easy now, gor luvva duck. The future of the planet's down to you now. You and Sonic were the only ones who could have stopped Robotnik. So now you're on your sweet little tod.’

‘Will you come back to Robotnik's laboratory and help me?’ Tails said, trying to get a pathetic, pleading look into his eyes.

Mickey shook his head sadly. ‘Look, me old mucker, all that stuff about swinging in the trees, that's all just a front. Me, I'm a land monkey, and I get out of puff running, oh, more than twenty metres. And that's on a

good day. I wouldn't be any use to you at all. I'd slow you down hopelessly.'

That was true, Tails thought sadly. He and Sonic were the only people with a hope of stopping Robotnik, just as Mickey had said.

It was at that moment that the waffles flew up out of the toaster. Mickey grabbed them on their way down. 'Hey, they *really* flew up out of there! That's our chum Sonic all right!'

'Oh, don't say that. It only makes it worse, somehow.'

'Oh, all right then. Here's your waffle. One for you and two for me. I'm one hungry monkey this morning.'

'Wait a second. How many waffles did you put into him?'

Mickey checked the packet. 'Well, there were eight in there to start with, and there are four left. Stands to reason, don't it? It does not take a genius-monkey, although I happen to be one, to work out that I used four, didn't I?'

'Don't talk like that, Mickey. It makes you sound like Robotnik and that's not nice at all. But the point is: there are only three on the plate!'

It was true. Four waffles had gone into Sonic the Toaster, and only three had come out.

Mickey pondered this for a moment. Twiddling the dials on the toaster, he let out a little cry of amazement.

'What is it, dude?'

'He's not switched on! That is, I haven't plugged him into the old juice. This is most peculiar and no mistake. It's almost as if there's some energy in him. Well, there must be. How else could he have cooked those waffles?' Mickey was stuffing the rest of the contents of the packet of waffles into Sonic. 'I still haven't plugged him in. Let's see how it goes, me old china.'

Shortly afterwards, two crisply-toasted waffles shot into the air and sailed away over the tops of the palm trees.

'Crikey!' Tails exclaimed. 'That's no ordinary toaster!' Staring cautiously into the toaster racks from a safe distance, he could see there

were no waffles jammed inside. Two of them had simply vanished.

‘Well of course it's no ordinary toaster, chum. It's Sonic the Toaster! Now, let's use our bonces. What is Sonic's most prominent characteristic?’

‘He's very fast.’

‘And?’

‘He's radically cool.’

‘Yes, and?’

‘He's my best friend.’

Mickey sighed with exasperation. ‘You're being slow. He's also greedy, right? Scoffs unbelievable amounts of food.’

‘Well, that's because of his special supersonic metabolism. He needs it all, you know.’ Tails knew that one off by heart. After all, Sonic had explained it to him over and over again.

‘All right, all right. I'm not saying he doesn't, don't you get me wrong now, all right? Don't you see? The toaster's scoffed the waffles. That suggests that there's something left of old Sonic inside it.’

It might have been their imaginations, or just wishful thinking, but there did seem to be just the faintest rattling sound from inside the shiny chrome of the toaster at that very instant. Mickey peered closely into the inside of the toaster.

‘Only a few crumbs. I don't think there's a miniature hedgehog running round trapped inside there. This is weird.’ Then a broad grin spread across his face.

‘I have just had a gobsmackingly brilliant idea!’ Mickey yelled. ‘First we're going to need oh, about two hundred packs of waffles. Tails, put that toaster somewhere safe and let's go buy out the store.’



Sally was getting hungry and thirsty, and she was also very miserable and lonely. The air conditioning ducts seemed to go on for kilometres in all directions. She'd come up against a couple of metal grilles, beyond one of which she could see factory production lines with great animal cages being

assembled by robots. Another one showed her a horrid pumping station. That was filled with a tangled jungle of steel tubes and valves, lots of things that made glooping and glopping noises, and was full of vicious robots with six arms and a pair of claws on each. Their heads constantly rotated so that they could look all around themselves at the same time. Sally didn't think it was safe to enter either of those places.

What was worse, she'd been chased by a couple of small Whisps — small enough to prowl the ducts, looking for any creature which might elude Robotnik's grasp. Only by sheer, outrageous luck had she survived: she'd fallen over as she ran away from them, and by instinct had kicked up her back legs. That had sent the first Whisp flying backwards where it hit the other one, leaving two crunched robots lying in a small pile of metal refuse. Sally had very carefully taken a long steel pin out of the mess, hoping that she might be able to use it to prise open a grille if she found anywhere safer to emerge.

Now she was at a junction, with ducts leading off in all directions. She didn't have any idea which way to go. She had been around and around and her sense of direction was totally confused. There was even a chance that she had already been here and was simply going round in circles. She sat down with her head in her paws and almost burst into tears. But she forced herself to remember that she had to rescue her friends somehow. They were depending on her. Somehow that thought cheered her.

Then she sniffed at the air. There was a definite smell of rotten eggs coming from one of the ducts. That meant Robotnik himself was around here somewhere! Prowling back and forward, sniffing the air a few metres along each duct, she finally figured out which one it was. With a new determination in her stride, she lolloped along to see what was at the end of the tunnel.



‘All right, me old fruit. We're going to try an eggsperiment — sorry, an experiment. Lumme, but that's catching. Well, Sonic, I don't know if you can hear me.’ Mickey crouched over the toaster and spoke into the

slots where you popped waffles in. It looked extremely peculiar. Even on Mobius, you don't find monkeys talking into toasters very often.

‘But if you can, use your lug-holes and listen. I'm going to put one waffle in your left side and one in your right side. If you can hear me, shoot out the right-hand waffle pronto. You can, um, eat the other one.’

Ripping open a pack from the enormous pile of waffle packets beside him, Mickey stuffed two of them into the toaster. Moments later, the right-hand one shot out. The other one had disappeared. Tails thought he heard the very slightest hint of a gulp, or perhaps a very slight burp, but he couldn't be sure.

Mickey repeated the experiment to make sure he hadn't just been lucky the first time. It worked exactly the same.

‘Well, my foxy-faced friend, it looks like we have what we in the trade would call the mind of a hedgehog and the body of a toaster. We have the world's first toasthog! At least, I think that's better than a hedger! That doesn't sound right at all.’

‘It isn't funny, Mickey. How would you like it if you'd been turned into a toaster?’

‘Sorry, guv; I'm out of order. Okey-dokey, let's get a bit more ambitious. Now, we can put four waffles in here and there are four different racks. Sonic, if you can hear me clearly and understand everything I say, shoot out one from the left side and one from the right side, there's a good bloke.’

Mickey began to run a whole series of tests, starting with one waffle for Yes and two for No, and then whole series of waffle-firings for a letter code. All the time he jotted down notes into his computer. Tails couldn't follow everything he was doing, but after 128 packets of waffles had disappeared into the air in all directions, Mickey seemed satisfied.

‘Well, this toaster is our old chum Sonic all right. He's been talking to me. Well, he's been waffling actually. Boom boom!’

Tails tapped his foot like he'd seen Sonic do. When Sonic tapped his foot, most people tended to stop talking too much. Or at least, to stop making bad jokes.



‘Oh, all right. I can't help having a sense of humour! Look, Sonic says that you must take him back to Robotnik's laboratory and somehow reverse what happened to him. He says that he can help you on the way, if you run into any bother. He thinks he can put the same energy he used to put into his Super Spins to make himself into a Toaster Blaster. All you need is lots of waffles and you can use him as a Waffle Gun. He says you might even be able to blast down the door that was in your way last time. Hold up though, cos before you go, there's a little experiment Sonic wants me to try with him. Are you sure about this, Sonic?’

A Waffle shot out of the left-hand side of the toaster.

‘Righty-ho.’ Mickey started dragging out a toolbox and rigging up a large battery with a pair of wires ending in metal connections. ‘Now, I don't think we can risk plugging Sonic into the mains. That would be too dangerous.’

*‘Plug him into the mains? Are you mad?’* Tails yelled in alarm.

‘Well, what are toasters designed to do? I reckon it's worth a try. First up, though, let's just try a 12-volt battery.’ Mickey hooked the connectors up to the toaster and stuck four waffles into it. ‘Stand clear of the doors, mind your back.’

Tails leapt out of the way just in time. A small puff of blue smoke drifted hazily out of the top of the toaster. Then the waffles shot into the air. This time, they went so fast that Tails could hardly see them as they sped over his head. They were over the horizon and out of sight in seconds. Far in the distance came the sound of a frightened seagull which had narrowly avoided being waffled into a watery grave.

‘Gorblimey, luvva duck! Give that hedgehog a coconut! I don't think I dare risk plugging him into the mains. Actually, I reckon it's better like this because you can carry the battery around with him. All you need now is just a little something extra I can fix up for you...’

# 16

## EAT HOT WAFFLE DEATH, BADNIKS!

Tails looked, and felt, very peculiar indeed. He had a huge bandolier of waffles around his neck, which fed into a funny home-made feeder tray which triggered them into Sonic when Tails pulled a little lever on the side of it. 'Field tests,' as Mickey had called them, had shown Tails that Sonic was an extremely efficient Waffle Gun. He could knock coconuts out of trees at a hundred metres. Heck, he almost knocked down the *trees* at a hundred metres. On the other hand, carrying Sonic, the battery, and all those waffles sure slowed a foxy dude down. And he missed having someone to talk to. All this hero stuff was really lonely; it was no wonder Sonic invited him to tag along on his adventures. He could have conversed with Sonic using a waffle-shooting code, but that would have wasted precious ammunition and it just wouldn't have been the same. But, from time to time as he edged up to Scrap Brain Zone, he whispered a few words to his buddy.

'Sonic, the back door seems to be open!' he said quietly, feeling ever so slightly ridiculous whispering into the top of a toaster. 'There are some funny-looking robots repairing it, I think.' He reached for the video camera to use the distant lens to look at them more closely, and then moaned with frustration. Of course, he hadn't brought it with him. It was just too much extra weight, what with having to carry the Waffle Gun/Toaster/Sonic with him.

Tails crept along the ground towards the open door. It was tough going, having to crawl and drag along a toaster at the same time. He was sixty metres away when one of the robots turned and looked in his direction. Tails froze, but in Scrap Brain Zone there just isn't any camouflage if you're a cute fox with two white-tipped tails carrying a massive blue toaster. It's hard to disguise yourself as a rusty robot.

The robot's metal back suddenly split apart and something popped up out of the cavity inside it. On metal legs, the spidery rocket gushed smoke

and fire from its rear end and hurtled out of the robot towards Tails! He just managed to leap out of the way before the missile struck the ground exactly where he'd been standing and exploded. A filthy black cloud of oily smoke drifted around the spot.

Tails was coughing and spluttering. He was a little bit dizzy, and more than a little bit concussed from the missile blast. His face was covered in black soot. He could also see another robot getting ready to fire a missile at him. It was just too much to tolerate. It was hero time.

Leaping out into the open, Tails raised the toaster, changed the setting to 'Very Well Done', and pointed it at the robots.

'Eat hot waffle death, you 'orrid ratniks!' he screamed. He charged as the toaster went *Budda-budda-budda!*, firing a tracer stream of deadly supersonic waffles at the robots. The machines disintegrated in a hail of fiery waffles, smashed into scattering clouds of metal debris which flew in all directions.

It was unbelievable that Tails didn't get his head blown off as he charged into the flying metal remains of the robots. But he was supercharged now, running faster than he'd ever gone in all his life. He kept some of his deadly waffles for the final showdown. He knew it was coming soon. He raced down the corridor beyond the entrance door, blew apart the door to the factory with a quick waffle burst, and sprayed more waffles into the factory line, blowing up almost everything in his path. He emerged into the far passage and headed for the heavy steel door at the end. Gritting his teeth, looking *radically* fierce, he hefted Sonic the Toaster for one last destructive burst of killer waffle fire to blow the door apart. He was close now, and he knew it.



Sally peered through the grille at Robotnik. He was talking to himself. Robotnik seemed to do that quite a lot. He did it partly because he was mad, and partly because he didn't have anyone as intelligent as himself to talk to. Which is what happens when you surround yourself with robots.

'Just a little change here, I think. Ha ha! Oh yes! I will get Eggor to make the necessary alterations. Then we shall move the FAROUT machine to the central laboratory and begin the final conversion program. And the

Master Machine will soon be built! Ha ha ha ha! Yum, yum,' Robotnik slobbered as he cracked another shell into his hand and slurped at the raw, mushy egg.

Peering at the insane professor through the grille, Sally managed to force back an involuntary 'Yuk!' of disgust. She could see that this must be one of Robotnik's offices. It was crammed with desks and lots of computers, filing cabinets and all the sorts of things she'd seen in scientist's offices in movies.

'Hmmm. Not sure about Eggor, though. Not one of my better eggsperiments. I had better — ha ha! — put him into the Retrogressive Behaviour Analyser to make sure none of his previous behaviour is returning. Can't have that. Oh no!'

Sally wondered for a moment what Eggor's 'previous behaviour' might have been. She had always been sure that Eggor was rather unusual in some way, not just an ordinary robot. Certainly his recent behaviour had been odd, albeit that it was to her benefit. But she stopped wondering when she saw Robotnik fiddling with a small piece of equipment on one of his work benches. He had his back to her and was completely absorbed in what he was doing. He was muttering away to himself, and seemed to be filing or sawing something. At least, the noise he was making sounded like that.

'Now that we have successfully transmogrified the other animals, we know the machine will work! Oh yes! Only that pesky squirrel to find here now!'

Sally's heart sank. She had lost track of how long she'd been stuck in the air ducts. She knew she'd dozed off from fatigue for a little while. That must have been longer than she'd realised. It must be the day after she'd escaped. In Robotnik's windowless laboratory there was only artificial light, so Sally couldn't tell whether it was night or day. But it was plain from what Robotnik had muttered that her friends were gone, or at least transformed into a matching set of kitchen utensils. And what was her chance of escape?

Then Sally had a brain wave. The noise Robotnik was making might cover up anything she might do — like force the grille off the wall. Since Robotnik had his back to her, she just might be able to hit him over the

head and, and — well, she wasn't thinking about what she might do afterwards. This plan was enough to be going on with. She took the metal pin she had salvaged from the Whisps in her two front paws and strained with all her might. The metal grille was really tightly wedged and her face screwed up with the effort of it all.

She thought that she'd just about edged it a centimetre or two open when the far door to Robotnik's office disintegrated. Just like that. Sally wondered if she might not be hallucinating. It looked like the door had been blown apart by a stream of waffles, but that was obviously impossible. Waffles couldn't blow down a steel door. As she stared in astonishment, a silhouetted figure stood at the door with a drifting cloud of light blue smoke around him. He had some very odd kind of weapon in his hands. On a bad day, if you were *really* out to lunch, you might have thought it was a toaster. He looked incredibly impressive, like something out of a really cool movie.

‘There you are, you fiendishly fiendish heinous Robotnik-type rat! Well, eat waffle destruction! Make my day!’ It sounded a bit like Tails, but not that much, Sally thought. Whoever was standing in the doorway was clearly half-mad and his speech was way uncool.

Tails couldn't see Sally, of course. He was in total heroic waffle-blasting overload. He raised Sonic and let fly at the cowering Robotnik. It was at that moment that Tails realised that he didn't have any waffles left. ‘Whoops,’ he blurted.

Recovering very quickly for a man of his repulsively bloated demeanour, Robotnik had seen it too. Grabbing the peculiar length of steel tubing on his work desk, he lifted it and pointed it at Tails. The fox was instantly bathed in a blue beam of light. Struggling to rush at his enemy, Tails found he couldn't move his legs. He was paralysed!

Robotnik gloated eggsultantly. ‘Ha! Puny wretch! Now I shall transmogrify you and be rid of you forever!’ Frantically grabbing at a control panel on the work desk, he pulled a lever right over to ‘OVERLOAD’. Robotnik's mind flashed up a warning: this was only a small-scale prototype, and he couldn't be sure it would work properly. But Tails was paralysed, and as the ray began to turn from blue to green the

silhouette of a fox began slowly but surely to change into that of a coffee percolator, a nice brown one with two handles...

Sally gave one last desperate heave. The grille gave way and flew out of the hole in the wall, and she leapt at Robotnik. The grille got there first, hitting him on the back of the head and sending him reeling sideways. Sally missed him and went skidding along the work table. She hit the lever hard, knocking it from OVERLOAD to REVERSE. Unable to stop her momentum, she fell off the end of the table and hit her head on the floor. Everything turned black.



‘Oh, yuk, yuk, *eeuugghhhh!*’ Sally was forced into befuddled wakefulness by the foul stink of rotten eggs being wafted under her nose. Sonic was waving a cracked shell filled with stinky bad egg at her. Tails was standing safely to one side holding his nose.

‘Come on, Sally, we’ve got to find the other dudes fast!’ Sonic insisted.

‘Where’s Robotnik?’ Sally was confused. Where had Sonic come from?

‘He ran away. But he’ll be back with his robots, and really soon! We must get to our friends NOW!’ Sonic was urgent.

‘Yes, they’re in —’ she started, and then she remembered. ‘It’s too late. He’s changed them all. Into things like —’

‘Like toasters?’ Sonic looked grim.

‘Well, maybe. I don’t know. But we’ll never be able to find them if we don’t know what they are, and I don’t know!’ She burst into tears. She forgot for the moment that Johnny was a mop sitting in a bucket somewhere. She was too upset and confused to remember.

‘Okay. But at least we’ve got you, Sally. That’s a start. Come on.’ Sonic lifted her up and looked at Tails. Then they just ran, and ran, and ran.

# **17**

## **EMPEROR ROBOTNIK'S FIENDISH TRANSMOGRIPLEX**

Tails and Sonic were trying to take in the sheer bogusness of it all. They could hardly believe it when they learned that Johnny Lightfoot was being used to wash corridor floors.

‘That's so totally heinous! It's bad enough being a toaster, believe me, but being a mop, well —’ Sonic was livid. He pounded his fist into his other hand in the way that heroes can do but which just makes lesser types look stupid.

Tails and Sally hadn't pressed their pal too hard to tell them what life was like as a toaster. It didn't seem to be very tactful in the circumstances, and he hadn't seemed terribly eager to fill them in on the details.

‘But at least we do know that our friends still have their minds intact. And the process can be reversed.’ Tails was hopeful.

‘Yes, don't I know it, dudes and dudesses,’ Sonic muttered. He was one radically irate hedgehog. He had hated having to run from Robotnik's laboratory. He wouldn't have fled if Sally hadn't obviously been in real danger, concussed and confused.

Sally mopped her brow with a handkerchief. As she did, a crumpled piece of paper slipped from the folds of the cloth. She was about to kick it away, irritably, when Sonic stopped her.

‘Just a minute! What's that?’

‘I don't know. It's just a grotty bit of scrunched-up paper!’ Sally was still recovering from her ordeal. Her head still hurt, she was tired and she was famished. She kept trying to get the thought of a massive plate of gorgeous, steaming hot waffles out of her brain.

Sonic retrieved the ball and unfolded it. His eyes began to get wider and wider. His paws twitched just very slightly. ‘What is it, dude?’ Tails

could see his friend was getting excited about something.

‘It's some of Robotnik's notes! You must have picked this up by accident when you slid along his table, Sally. What a most excellent and useful deed!’

‘What does it say?’ Tails snuffled up behind Sonic, nose twitching with curiosity.

‘Well, it's just jottings. Odd lines here and there. Let's see. “Mark 1 prototype” — look, here's a little sketch.’

‘It looks just like the one he zapped me with, Sonic,’ Tails suggested.

‘Yes, it does. Mark 2 FAROUT assembly — here's a sketch of that as well.’

Sally peeked at the drawing. ‘That looks just like the one I saw in the main laboratory. The one he used to turn Johnny Lightfoot into a mop.’

‘Next, Stage 3, it says here. The Transmogriplex. Heinous! Look at the size of it!’

Indeed, the Transmogriplex looked thoroughly enormous. If it was drawn to the same scale as the FAROUT machine Sally had seen, it would have had to have been fifty metres long. It was vaguely elliptical, with a whole series of barrels radiating from a central spine in all directions.

‘Oh, and just read these notes! World transformer — all molecules eggschanged. *All life on Mobius transformed into machinery!*’ Sonic was horrified. Tails and Sally took an involuntary step backwards.

‘Oh come on dudes. He's been trying to do exactly this for ages!’ Sonic tried to cheer them up.

‘Yeah, Sonic, but this time he's got a working model and we've seen what it can do. Haven't we, Mr Ex-Toaster?’ Tails replied.

‘Please stop reminding me about that. It wasn't my fault we ran out of ammunition, was it? I mean, someone blew his cool and got a little too carried away, right?’

‘Boys, boys!’ Sally Acorn said loudly. ‘We're not going to get anywhere by having silly arguments.’ Tails and Sonic looked suitably abashed. ‘Let me have a closer look at that.’ Taking the paper, she read the last few scrawled lines. They weren't easy to read, because Robotnik had



nasty spidery handwriting and the paper was a bit stuck together with congealed egg white, but Sally could make a few more words out.

‘Project Total Transmogrification — complete when master system constructed at the Wing — *estimated time, five days.*’

They all looked at each other.

‘The latest he could have written this was yesterday,’ Sonic reasoned. ‘That gives us four days max. Oh, bad vibes! We’re going to have to work real fast!’



The sight that greeted them back at Scrap Brain Zone wasn't one they'd ever considered as a possibility. The laboratory was being dismantled! Egg-o-Matics were flying ponderously away from the site, carrying huge metal pods full of equipment and apparatus.

‘Of course. He’s building the Transmogriplex somewhere else. He just used this place for secret small-scale experiments. Now the real thing is being finished somewhere else. And I wonder where?’ said Sonic, gazing up to make sure the flying vehicles hadn’t seen them.

‘Surely it couldn’t be —’

‘In the Metropolis?’ Sonic finished. ‘Yeah. Heinous ratfinkdude. It’s the only place big enough to hide it. Hey buddy, we’d better back off. Too risky here, we might be seen, so let’s — uh-oh!’

Far above them in the sky, a large Egg-o-Matic had circled in an arc and was now coming straight at them.

‘Move it, Tails!’ Sonic yelled, looking around for some suitable cover to hide behind.

It was easier said than done. As the Egg-o-Matic fired its first ray gun attack, the ground around them exploded. A swarm of Burrobots clawed up from the ruins of the scrap metal and blocked their way back. Far above them, they could hear Robotnik’s insane laughter.

‘Prepare — ha ha ha! — to become scrap metal, hateful enemies of Emperor Robotnik!’

‘*Emperor* Robotnik? No, no. That's too much, dude!’ Sonic screamed back. As the Burrobots advanced and another Egg-o-Matic ray flashed across the ground right in front of them, Sonic began to spin.

Now, everyone knows that Sonic's Super Spin attack is a pretty cool manoeuvre. This time, Sonic simply whirled round and round in a very tight circle, picking up speed at an incredible rate. Tails thought he was going to burrow right down into the ground. But, just when the hedgehog was going so fast that he looked like a blurred blue circle of light with a red base, he leapt.

Sonic put everything he had into it. Gritting his teeth, he soared and soared and went *SMACK!!!!* into the advancing Egg-o-Matic. It rolled over and over, and for a glorious second Tails thought it was going to fall out of the sky, even as its last green ray attack went hurtling past his head. Veering crazily, the craft lurched back into a stable flight path, gliding down, just managing to avoid hitting the ground.

‘Yeah! Way to go, Sonic!’ Tails howled, punching the air with a furry fist. But that still leaves about two hundred Burrobots, Tails thought miserably as his chum spun back to the ground. What are we going to do about them?

Looking round, he was amazed to see a large and very confused group of *things* where the Burrobots had been. He wasn't sure exactly what they were. They were vaguely Burrobot-shaped, but they seemed to be made out of something like congealed semolina and they were beginning to lose their shape rather horribly. He stared at them, fascinated.

Sonic hurtled up and put his hand on Tails's shoulder. ‘Looks like the Transmogrification Ray can affect robots too. I wonder what it's turned *them* into?’ Then he shook his head. ‘No, it's just gross. I don't want to know. Come on, buddy, it's time to go. Robotnik's going to have the robot search teams here in seconds and I for one don't want to be around when they turn up. Let's scarper.’

As they raced back to Green Hill Zone, Robotnik's final words, amplified through the electronic megaphone he had on board Egg-o-Matic, mocked them. ‘You may have got away this time, but you are doomed! Ha ha ha! Do you hear me? YOU'RE DOOMED, YOU'RE ALL DOOOOOMED!!!!!’

As Robotnik's ship turned away, the sky was filled with an immense geometric shadow and the ground shook with an immense rumbling noise. A huge ship lumbered across the sky. It was mega-mega-ginormous. Gigantic to the max. Endlessly vast. Totally, unbelievably massive. Look, it was BIG.

Sonic took one look at it and muttered, 'So that's where he's building it. Remember the note? "Constructed at the Wing". That's his flying Wing Fortress. That's where it's at, little dude. That's where we're going to have to go.'

Tails gulped. His stomach didn't feel very happy.

# 18

## ASSAULT ON THE WING FORTRESS

It was night-time on Mobius.

Sonic and Tails were readying themselves for their fateful journey. High above them, they could see the lights winking on and off inside Robotnik's Wing Fortress. They'd decided on an approach by night, since it would be harder to see them coming.

‘But what if he's got radar?’ Tails had worried.

‘Well, little dude, it just means we have to fly superfast. And we'll fly really close to the ground and then shoot up right underneath the fortress. Maybe we'll be lucky, and find the blind spot of the radar.’ Sonic was talking in a lot of long words; that probably meant that he was getting nervous.

‘Does radar have blind spots?’ This wasn't something Tails knew anything about. He was surprised that Sonic did, but Sonic had once been in the laboratory of Ovi Kintobor before he became transformed into the evil Robotnik, so there was no knowing what scraps of information he might have picked up there.

‘I think it does. I think I saw it on a video once. Anyway, it's our Best Plan.’

Tails pulled on a long scarf and a pair of goggles. Sonic looked away, then did a double-take that would have won him an award at the All-Mobius Comedy Awards.

‘Tails, what are you doing?’ his friend blurted in amazement.

‘It's how people dress up when they're going to fly into a battle. It's something I saw on video once.’

‘Must have been a seriously old video, dude. It wasn't in black and white by any chance, was it? Chill, Tails. You're not going to need them.’

Tails looked crestfallen. He thought that he'd looked pretty flipping cool in his neat-fitting goggles and groovy brown scarf. In the movie he'd seen the best, most heroic star had worn just such an outfit, and he'd ended up with the girl at the end too.

‘It's okay, dude. You look cool enough without them. Trust me on this. Now hop on board and let's head on out.’



Sonic screamed into acceleration right underneath the Wing Fortress. Tails was riding on his back, twirling his tails for all he was worth to give them some extra thrust. He had to be careful of Sonic's spikes, of course, but this seemed the best way to get close to the huge spaceship really quickly.

Above them, as they approached, massive metal bays on the underside of the Fortress opened and a pair of huge flying robots glided down towards them. They seemed to know exactly where they were heading. The robots looked like vast metal birds, and Sonic knew exactly what they were.

‘Balkiries! Huh, easy-peasey!’ Balkiries were big, but they were slow and didn't manoeuvre easily. Usually, it was easy to escape them and stay well out of danger range. But these were no ordinary Balkiries. Robotnik had built a little something eggstra into them. Just what that was, Sonic and Tails were about to find out.

On the bridge of the Fortress, Robotnik yelled at Eggor. ‘There they are! Starboard oh-six hundred! Prime the air-to-hedgehog missile on Red Leader One! Ha ha!’

‘Missile primed, Master.’

‘FIRE!!!’ Robotnik eggshorted. Eggor pressed the big red button on the panel in front of him. Outside, a deadly, sleek black missile with an egg-shaped tip streaked from the underside of the left wing of one of the Balkiries, heading straight towards Sonic and Tails.



‘Bogus! Yikes too!’ Sonic changed his angle of flight quickly, veering off to the right. The Balkiries plunged down below them, confused by the change, but the missile kept right on coming. What was worse, the other Balkiry had fired a missile and that was beginning to raise its nose lazily upwards, its hedgehog-seeking on-board computer guiding its flight with an accuracy quite remarkable for something built by the crazed Dr Robotnik.

Soon a furiously zig-zagging hedgehog, with his tail-spinning foxy passenger acting as an excellent auxiliary thrust and rudder, was trying to weave away from the missiles getting closer and closer.

‘We have them, Eggor! My final triumph will come sooner than I eggspected! Ah, this is an eggsquisite moment!’ Robotnik wobbled with delight as he watched the missiles getting ineggsorably closer to their target on the radar screen. ‘Prepare to be eggsterminated, you hateful little blue menace!’

Sonic made a desperate glide towards ground level, but once again the missiles just couldn't be shaken off. There was no escape. Or so it seemed.

The first missile was about five metres away when Sonic spun off to one side, catching Tails unawares. The little fox was thrown off, and flailed around with his arms and legs for just a split second before he regained his balance. When he did, he found that he was wrapped around the missile. It had passed just underneath him, and he'd fallen on to it!

‘Eek!’ squeaked Tails. What am I going to do with this? he thought, his mind in a panic. If he'd stopped to consider it, he could just have twirled his tails and flown off, but there was a second missile not so very far behind him, and he wasn't really thinking too clearly. Not that surprising, really. Frantically, he wrapped his arms and legs around the missile, hugging it tightly. As he did so, a small metal panel popped up underneath one of his paws.

Afterwards, Tails still wasn't sure what happened. He was just trying to hold on to the missile, and one of his paws got stuck inside the panel, and he pressed *something* by mistake, and...

Well, the missile lurched awkwardly in mid-air and its nose rose upwards. Tails held on even tighter as it flew further and further away from the ground, higher and higher. In the distance, he could see the second missile still chasing Sonic as the hedgehog bounced and sprang this way and that. Tail's missile arced back around and began to home in on the Fortress.

‘Whoa-whoa-*whoooooaaahhhh*!’ yelled Tails. Normally he would have paid good money for a go on a ride as exciting as this, but Tails wasn't in the mood for excitement on this scale.

On the bridge of the Fortress, it was mayhem.

‘Activate the eggstruding defender shields!’ Robotnik screamed.

‘I can't, Master,’ Eggor replied calmly.

‘What do you mean, you *can't*?’ Robotnik wobbled up and down in truly eggstreme fury.

‘All the energy from the defensive systems has been bypassed to boost the factory production,’ Eggor said in a very matter-of-fact way. He sensed that now was not the time for laconic sarcasm.

‘What eggscrabble idiot did that? I'll have him eggsecuted! Melted down for scrap metal!’ Robotnik howled.

‘It was you, Master. At 07:10 and 29 seconds this morning. Look, I logged the order on the computer. You said that we must have all the energy possible for assembling —’

‘Idiot! Fool! Bad Robot! Do you have to mindlessly obey *everything* I tell you?’ Robotnik pounded his fists on the panel before him, only narrowly missing several very important buttons.

‘Impact time estimated at three seconds and counting,’ Eggor replied as coolly as his programming allowed.



Tails came to his senses just in time. He managed to let go of the missile before it hit the main bay underneath the Fortress. Well, he more or less fell off it, really, which was just as well since the missile struck the bay dead centre and caused a huge explosion. Huge bursts of fire and

flying swarms of shrapnel cascaded from the Fortress. With a superlative twirl of his tails, the flying fox took evasive action, only to find himself hurtling straight at Sonic, who was heading right up underneath him. Nimbly, Sonic spun out of collision course, grabbed his friend by the ears on the way down and redirected him upwards.

‘Those Balkiries, and the missile chasing me, they've gone out of control. I don't know how you turned that missile around but it was way cool, buddy!’ Sonic panted as they soared upwards.

Tails smiled happily. ‘Oh, it was nothing,’ he said modestly.

‘It was cool. Look! That won't have destroyed the Fortress, it's too big. But you've blasted a hole big enough to get a hundred dude heroes in. Let's go!’

Flying into the ruins of the bay, Sonic and Tails took in the scene of devastation. There was twisted and smoking metal everywhere, and two squadrons of Nebula robots, small twirling cones of metal, flying out of control in all directions. Far in the distance, way across the bay, a large hatch seemed to be still intact, though the steel was fire-blasted and riddled with dents and holes.

‘That's it! That's where we need to go. Come on, let's head on in!’ Sonic was really determined now. Tails followed his speeding buddy as fast as he could. Events were moving a little too fast even for him.

Sonic didn't bother to try to open the hatch. He just bounced right into it. Well, *slammed* right into it, to be quite honest. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it gave way immediately, and Sonic leapt into the long corridor leading into the heart of Robotnik's huge metal Fortress ship.

That wasn't the smartest move. The Fortress's defensive shields might not have been working, but its internal defences certainly were, and if there was one thing guaranteed to set them off it was a blue hedgehog with a cool demeanour. Great piston hammers in the ceiling started pounding down the full length of it as alarm buzzers and bells went crazy. Red alarm panels lit up all over the place with the message ‘HEDGEHOG ALERT!’.

Barely pausing to acknowledge the honour of having an entire security system set up exclusively to keep him out, Sonic sped and darted between the pounding pistons, gradually making his way further and



further along the corridor. Behind him, Tails made the fatal mistake of looking up for a split-second too long. As he took an extra step forwards, three tonnes of cast iron came hurtling down towards him.

‘Yow-urk!’ Tails was nabbed by the scruff of the neck and dragged an extra yard along. The tips of his tails waved free just a couple of centimetres past the Squashing Zone.

‘Gee, thanks, buddy. You saved my life!’ Tails beamed at Sonic. ‘Again!’

‘It was nothing. What are buddies for? Now hold on and let's get to Robotnik. This time, he isn't going to get away,’ Sonic replied, a grim and heroic expression on his face.

They only got ever-so-nearly squashed another three or four times before they got to the hatch at the end of the corridor. Sonic took a short run-up and smashed it down. He wasn't in the mood for the subtle approach.

When the doors slid open and Sonic and Tails leapt onto the control bridge, Robotnik spun around to greet them with a smug expression on his face. ‘So, we meet again!’ he eggsclaimed. ‘You are too late, as always. Ha ha ha! You petty fools! The last of my factory constructions has just been despatched to the Master Laboratory. We were only building the components of the Transmogriplex here. It is being assembled elsewhere! Ha hah haaaaaaa! Soon, all of Mobius will be one gigantic machine and I shall be invulnerable! Ha ha! And now, prepare to die, you wretched hedgehog!’

Robotnik's eggsposition was just a little too long. For while he was shouting out his speech, Sonic had spotted the tell-tale holes in the wall just past the hatchway. He leapt over the barrier of vicious spiked iron bars which sprang out; if he hadn't, he'd have had a lot more spikes than he usually had and it would have been Game Over for him, and indeed for all of Mobius. But now, with Tails in tow, he advanced upon the furious Robotnik.

‘So much for your traps, Robotnik! We've defeated you!’

‘Eggor! Activate the Eggscape Capsule!’ Robotnik wailed as he ran away from the advancing dudes. Eggor flicked some switches and waited

for Robotnik to reach the escape hatch.

‘That's cheating!’ Sonic said angrily.

‘What? Escaping?’

‘No, using a word like “eggscape”. It doesn't have an “x” in it.’ If there was one thing Sonic really hated, it was a cowardly villainous evil scientist who made bad puns.

The floor beneath Robotnik suddenly gave way as a metal plate there slid harmlessly open, and the scientist dropped twenty metres on to a huge padded surface. With surprising agility, he wobbled upright and made a swift dash for the capsule. Tails lunged after him, but as he did his tails were trapped in the hatch, which had sprung back to seal off Robotnik's escape. Hanging by his appendages, the fox could only look on helplessly as Robotnik wobbled into the pilot's seat and the capsule rose from its launch pad. The bays in the distance opened, and the egg-shaped craft slid slowly out into the night sky.

Tails was caught by surprise when the metal plate opened up once more, dumping him on to the huge cushion which Robotnik had used to break his fall. Looking up, he could see Sonic grinning in the distance. He dropped down to join his buddy.

‘Well, he's escaped again. Like, most heinous of him, as usual. However, I found a little button marked “AUTO DESTRUCT SEQUENCE” and pressed it before that funny robot up there could stop me. I think we'd better be leaving, little dude. And, like, hurry, OK?’



From a safe distance, Sonic and Tails watched the Fortress explode. It looked fabulous. Trails of fire and smoke shot out for kilometres, and the entire night sky was illuminated by the series of explosions which ripped the Fortress apart. The thunderclap echoed through the Zone louder than any natural storm, and flaming lumps of debris shot across the sky like meteors.

‘Groovy. That's the best fireworks display I've ever seen.’

‘Yeah, pretty cool,’ admitted Sonic. ‘We've defeated Robotnik. Again. Like, replay time or what? But he's still got that Transmogriplex

somewhere. The good news is, we destroyed that factory Fortress. Which means that if we can destroy the Transmogriplex itself, Mobius should be safe. For quite a long time anyway.'

'And the bad news is...' Tails knew perfectly well what it was. He just wanted Sonic to be the one to say it.

'And the heinously bad news is that we still have to find the Transmogriplex. And then destroy it. And that, my foxy-faced pal, is going to be one radically hard job even for such supercool heroes as ourselves. Once again we must save Mobius.' Sonic looked thoughtful. Perhaps a plan was hatching in that noble brain. Tails held his breath expectantly. Ah-ha! Here it came. Sonic spoke.

'But first, buddy, it is time for a serious pork-out. When the going gets tough, the tough get eating first. Let's go.'

# 19

## OH NO! IT'S PLAN D!

Sonic, Tails and Sally decided that Mickey the monkey might be a good dude to talk to. After all, the inventor of Mobius's one and only Waffle Gun clearly knew something about Technical Stuff. And there were those funny, scribbled little drawings on the crumpled page of notes Sally had taken from Robotnik's secret laboratory. They must surely be able to provide some clue as to what the evil scientist was up to. Maybe Mickey could tell them something more after he'd examined them.

Mickey chewed his way through a mound of peanuts large enough to choke a small elephant while Sonic told him the story of their adventures to date. Grabbing the paper in his salt-smeared paws, he looked over the diagrams. Once or twice, he rubbed his chin. Then he scratched his head a bit. Finally, he put the piece of paper to one side and ate some more peanuts.

'Come on, quaint-talking inventor dude, don't keep us in suspense!' Sonic was impatient for answers.

'Yeah, right! What does it all mean?' Tails was eager to know what Mickey had learned too.

'Well, I'm Robotnik's uncle if I know. Can't make head or tail of it, really I can't. But ta for the peanuts anyway,' Mickey said casually.

Sonic didn't spot the mischievous grin. 'Oh, *bummer*. So now we have to face an unknown superdestruction weapon of totally awesome capabilities without even a —'

'Oh, cut it out. I'm only pulling your leg. Y'know, taking the mick — geddit? Suit yourselves. Look, it's a simple enough weapon. It's a molecule exchanger. It turns nice, friendly living people like us into machines,' Mickey said.

'We know that. It happened before, when Robotnik imprisoned us inside robots,' Sally said.

‘But this is different. He's given up on that daft idea after Sonic released everyone. This time, the machine keeps your minds intact. But you can't do anything of your own free will. You see, you'll be forced to act as good obedient robots. Or whatever Robotnik turns you into. But because your own minds are still AI, you'll still be as smart as before. That'll give Robotnik smart robots and intelligent machines — much smarter than he's had before. And that'll mean that, for sure, no one and nothing will ever be able to stop him.’ Mickey sounded awfully sure that he was right. Everyone else was hoping that he wasn't.

‘What about this Transmogriplex thingie then?’ Sonic queried. He still wasn't even sure that he'd got the name right.

‘Looks to me as if that machine is designed to generate a force field. Not just a ray, like that FAROUT malarkey. The force field will spread out, wider and wider, and everything in the area will get transmogrified. Maybe not all at once. But that's the general idea.’

‘It looks as if it's huge.’ Tails was stating the obvious, really.

‘Oh, positively meganormous, old fruit. Something that size — well, it's obvious where Robotnik is building it. Close to the middle of the planet, obviously, so the field can spread out as quickly as possible. And somewhere where he feels safe, with trillions of robots and traps and all that kind of bally awful stuff.’

Tails winced at the monkey's weird language, which seemed to be changing every time they met. ‘And where would that be?’

‘Why, sir, in Metropolis Zone, of course.’

‘We were right the first time,’ Sonic said smugly.

‘But that's desperately dangerous.’ Tails was growing more anxious by the second. His whiskers were twitching faster and faster, and his tummy was giving him strange pains.

‘Well, of course it's dangerous, squire. I just explained, that's why he's building it there. But I do have some rather interesting up-to-date gen on Metropolis Zone which might be of some interest to you fellows.’

‘Yeah? Cool. Let us into the secret, dude.’

‘Ah, forgive my enquiry, but how many peanuts is it worth?’ Mickey enquired, with a fake expression of innocence on his face.

‘Look, Mickey, are you invulnerable to Transmogrification?’ Sonic asked crossly.

‘Don't think so, chum. Why do you ask?’

‘Because if you don't want to end up as a refuse bin or a microwave oven you'd better tell us everything you can.’

‘That seems reasonable to these ears,’ Mickey blustered hastily. ‘Well, to begin with, Metropolis Zone has an Undercity. That's where the drains lead to. Where the water from the acid rain goes. Where all the chemical muck from Robotnik's factories gets dumped. And lots of other things besides. There are kilometres and kilometres of tubes and passages and tunnels all over the place. Ducts and vaults and —’

‘Keep it short, Mickey. Everyone knows all this. Why are you telling us what we already know?’ Sonic was forgetting that most of his friends didn't know. Unlike heroic dude-types, they'd never been anywhere near the Metropolis and they were fascinated, if repelled, by what it sounded like.

‘Met the rats of the Undercity, have you?’ Mickey asked coolly.

‘Yeah. They're bad dudes. Most of them serve Robotnik, the rats.’ Sonic gave a little theatrical shudder; he didn't like them one little bit.

‘Well, things are a bit different now. Robotnik has been sending ratniks down to the Undercity.’ Mickey sounded most pleased with himself for knowing this.

‘Robot rats?’

‘Give that hedgehog a robot coconut! Well guessed, sir! It seems that Robotnik doesn't trust his rodent friends any more. So he's using robot rats to clean up and keep the Undercity tidy. Apparently, the real rats are doing annoying things like chewing power cables and stuff, which isn't very helpful. Disrupted the electricity supply to the factories. Puts everything behind schedule. Generally a real pain in the neck if you look at it from our man Robotnik's point of view.’

‘Gross! Why don't they eat pizza like everyone else?’ Tails blurted. The idea of robot rats didn't sound very nice at all.

‘Don't ask me, I'm a monkey, not a rat,’ Mickey snorted back. ‘Well, anyway, if you're going to the old Metropolis you could try to get the rats to help you. They know how to get to everywhere above ground through secret tunnels and passages. You could get past a lot of guards and alarms that way.’

‘Sounds worth a try,’ Tails said, though it was clear from the way he said it that he was unsure.

‘You could try something else, Sonic.’ Sally spoke quietly, but everyone listened. She didn't often butt into a discussion but when she did, it was worth hearing her out. ‘Perhaps the rats could also chew the power cables and cut off the electricity supply for you. Then the alarm systems and things wouldn't work properly. You might be able to get right up close to Robotnik's new machine without being detected.’

‘Cool idea, Sally! You aren't just one pretty face,’ Sonic beamed at her. Sally blushed just a little. ‘Such a cool mind would be very useful where we are going. But of course this will be a job for superdudes of action! With my superlative buddy, Tails, I shall finally put a stop to this dreadful menace which totally threatens the whole of our plant home! Wish me good luck!’

Everyone cheered for a bit, then fell silent. That was partly because they were really worried that Sonic and Tails wouldn't make it this time. It was also partly because they felt a bit self-conscious and silly. Sonic didn't notice; he'd heard the cheers of his adoring pals and now it was time to go. There's not much time for rest if you're a superdude.



‘I hadn't expected anything like this.’ Tails was dismayed. At the edge of Metropolis Zone, thousands of robots were hard at work. They were building up a twenty-metre high fence and running long power cables to the wire mesh of the fence. There were big metal signs which showed the body of a hedgehog with a big red cross across it, and the words ‘WARNING: HEDGEHOG FREE ZONE!’ in large red lettering

underneath. The fence went on in all directions as far as the eye could see. It looked like Robotnik was walling off the entire city.

‘What are those things anyway?’ Tails asked.

‘Don't know, little buddy. They look a bit like Burrobots, but what with those extra limbs that end in shovels, I've never seen anything that looks like that before.’

‘Me neither. They don't look very strong, but there are hundreds and hundreds of them.’

‘Huh! Nothing a pair of fairly cool dudes couldn't handle. We could smash that bunch to pieces in, oh, seconds. Anyway, Robotnik's brain must be turning into scrambled egg. We can jump that fence easily,’ Sonic boasted.

‘Of course we can! We could jump a fence twice that high. We could jump a fence three times that high. No, we could jump a fence *ten* times —’

‘Okay, buddy, don't overdo it. I think we both have the general idea. Now let's take a good run-up, accelerate, and get in some hurdling practice.’

Sonic and Tails retreated a short distance and started to run full-pelt. At exactly the right place they leapt into the air, up to the fence, and way over it —

Except that they didn't go way over it. They hit a wall of force, an invisible barrier, right above the fence and it was like running into a brick wall. Stunned and startled, they fell out of the air and landed heavily. Back outside the fence. They'd just bounced off the barrier.

‘Hmmmm. This may be trickier than we had originally planned, dudeling,’ Sonic said, shaking his head to get his eyes back in their correct sockets. ‘So let's take a longer run-up, and a higher jump, and go right over this most bogus obstacle.’

So they took a longer run-up. They ran even faster. They leapt way up in the air. They were so high they could see the lights of Metropolis Zone's skyscrapers right in front of them.

And they hit the barrier again.



‘You know, I think it's time to try Plan B,’ suggested Sonic as they dusted themselves down back on the ground beyond the fence once more.

‘What's Plan B?’

‘I don't know. I'm still thinking about it. But from the way I felt when I slid down that barrier this time, it looks like Robotnik must have a shield dome around the entire Zone. Boy, he isn't making it easy.’

‘We could race right around the city at superfast speed and find out if there's anywhere where the robots haven't finished putting the fence up yet,’ Tails suggested helpfully.

‘Of course! That was Plan B. How bodacious of you to remember,’ Sonic said, glad that he'd been let off the hook. He was Lead Dude, and it didn't look quite so good when the sidekick did the smart thinking.



Unfortunately for our pair, Plan B didn't work either. The fence was around the entirety of Metropolis Zone. The only point of difference was a huge pair of steel gates which allowed some of Robotnik's huge robot carriers and Juggernauts in and out, but even there the barrier was strong too. Oh well; can't win them all.



‘Right. Now Robotnik's really going to get it, because now we shall be forced to use Plan C,’ growled an irritable hedgehog.

‘Plan C? What's that?’ said Tails dubiously.

‘Well, the way I see it, there are two possible ways in. Plan C means that we get into one of those trucks and lorries which feed chemicals in to the factories. There's always Plan D, of course, but hopefully we won't have to resort to *that*.’

‘Gosh! You even have a Plan D! Wow!’ Despite his earlier reservations, Tails was mightily impressed. ‘You certainly are one ace chap, Sonic.’

The neon light of the metropolis just illuminated a slightly smirking hedgehog face. It was only slightly smirking, because Sonic had no idea

what Plan D was. ‘But of course, dude. Now let's wait for a truck.’



‘Um, what is Plan D, Sonic?’

Trying to hitch a lift in on one of Robotnik's trucks had proved hopeless. Most of them were huge chemical container lorries, smooth-sided and with no way of holding on to them. What's worse, there were Chickbot gunners mounted on them, front and back, sitting in metal turrets, ready to shoot at anything vaguely hedgehog-like. At the gates, Buzz Bombers and Newtrons swarmed all over anything that entered, checking every last centimetre. Worse yet, behind the first set of steel gates there was another set. Even if Sonic and Tails could have got past, oh, a couple of hundred robots and loads of traps, they still wouldn't have been inside the Metropolis Zone. Something seemed to indicate that Robotnik wanted to keep them out. Meanwhile, Sonic was thinking so hard about Plan D that his brain ached, which was radically irritating.

‘Well, my foxy buddy, Plan D is quite complicated. Let me think for a second about how best to explain it to you,’ Sonic bluffed.

They were quiet for a minute or two.

‘Yes, and?’ Tails prompted.

‘Well, I hate to say this, but — hush! Can you hear something?’ Sonic was suddenly alert.

‘Of course I can. There are all those huge lorries thundering about polluting all the air in the Metropolis for a start.’

‘No, something else. *Listen!*’

Tails strained his hearing until he thought his ears were going to pop out of his head. Very, very faintly, the sound of discordant singing made itself heard. Slowly but surely, it grew louder and louder, and more and more awful. Sonic and Tails were both holding their paws tightly over their ears when a mound suddenly appeared in the earth a few metres in front of them. Out of it popped a dark, furry head wearing a pair of cool — albeit rather earth-spattered — shades, and a couple of heavy clawed paws followed right behind.

‘Hey! Hi there, hi there, I just leerver you wunnerful people! You know, it's truly great to be back in wunnerful —’

‘Stevie!’ Tails wasn't sure whether he should be pleased, appalled or just run away now.

‘Welcome to Plan D, Tails. Our emergency logistical back-up has just arrived, as we dudes with a military-style vocabulary are radically prone to say.’ If Tails had been able to drag his horrified eyes away from Stevie the Mole he would have noticed that Sonic looked very, very relieved.



Moles burrow fast. That's why they have those radically big claws and stuff. It wasn't long, therefore, before it became clear that Robotnik's barrier and dome didn't extend underground. At least, it wasn't a mole-proof barrier. From time to time, Stevie did stop to sing a line or two, but Sonic and Tails knew when he was going to do it because he threw his head back a bit just beforehand and they usually got their paws over their ears in time. Finally, thankfully, the mole's passage ended when he dug his way up to a metal hatch.

Sonic and Tails took a run-up along the mole's passage and crashed the hatch open. In the room before them, everything was dark, except for some tiny red lights twinkling along power cables which ran along the rim of the large metal pipe they'd forced their way into.

‘Stevie, my man, mucho thanks. Forgive us, we'd rilly leerver to stay and hear more of your awesome tunes but we have to go rat hunting.’ Sonic tried to sound sincere.

‘Rats? Oh, gross. You'd better have lots of real cheesy pizza.’

‘I thought that was mice?’ Tails asked.

‘Don't be silly,’ Stevie said crossly, ‘it's rats in the Undercity. The mice are out in the fields.’

‘No, I mean, I thought it was mice that liked cheese best.’

‘A common misconception. No, Undercity rats like lots of mozzarella and a sprinkling of anchovy and olive on the top. Boy, you guys can be so unhip sometimes,’ Stevie muttered as he retreated back along his tunnel.

‘Bummer,’ Sonic pondered.

‘Why? We're into the Undercity aren't we?’ Tails replied.

‘Yeah, but I forgot the olives.’



‘Eggor, there are times when I am almost sorry that you escaped in the second Eggscape Capsule,’ Robotnik said testily. Work was not going as swiftly as he had hoped. He had lied to Sonic; when the Fortress had exploded, he had lost some of the parts of the Transmogriplex and his robots were working round the clock to rebuild the last units, transformers, and gizmos. That had put him behind schedule, and Robotnik hated being behind schedule. He hated it almost as much as not being able to do the same things at the same time every day. Why, he almost hated it as much as he hated Sonic. And when things went wrong, Eggor usually got the blame. It has to be said, though, that Eggor was used to that.

‘Productivity is running at one hundred and seven per cent overall,’ Eggor offered.

‘Pah! No eggscuses. This is a case for eggstreme efficiency,’ Robotnik said, although the end of his sentence more or less disappeared into salivary slurpings as he gobbled up another raw egg from his pudgy hands.

‘I will do everything possible, Master. I shall eggshort everyone to work harder. I shall run the Robotnik Optimiser Program Executer on the control system.’

‘Pah! Those robots, they're too stupid. Give them a metre of ROPE and they'll use up a kilometre. Ha ha ha! They have no intelligence, Eggor. Not like you.’

‘No, Master.’

‘Ah, that is how Mobius will be, Eggor! Ha ha ha! I shall have smart machines and robots! The brains of the creatures they were will give them intelligence, but they will still be programmed to obey all my commands! All of them will call me MASTER! Ha ha, ha ha haaaa!’ Robotnik

wobbled with glee. He looked like an oversized marshmallow wearing trousers.

‘Do what you can to eggspedite the work,’ he said to Eggor in passing as he left for his bedroom with its huge egg-shaped bed. ‘I shall go and dream pleasant dreams of world — ha ha! — domination. Ah, I enjoy those so much!’

Unlike his portly master, Eggor didn't need to sleep. And he certainly didn't dream. But what he did would have surprised and alarmed Robotnik, if he'd been there to see it.

Eggor monitored the work in the factories, watching huge streams of information sail by on the computer screens. But, from time to time, his metal fingers flicked at the keyboard and he checked the files on transmogrifying. And on the animals they'd already changed. And, especially, on one they hadn't.

Sally Acorn.

Eggor gazed at the image of Sally on the screen for quite some time, and then he softly spoke some words which certainly shouldn't have been in his Lexical Access system. Words which the robot hadn't spoken before.

‘My, but that is *one cool babe*.’

Eggor almost fell backwards off his chair at the realisation of what he had just said. He glanced around him to make sure no one was eavesdropping but of course he was alone. He knew he needed an oil change and some serious corrective work to his circuits. All his programming told him that. He should turn himself into the Maintenance Department and get whatever was wrong fixed.

But he didn't want to. And these days, what Eggor didn't want to do, he didn't do.

## 20 KING RAT

When superdudes have warning of danger, they can move so fast you wouldn't believe it. When they get surprised, just a second of being off-guard can be a second too long. As you might have guessed, we bring this up because that is what has just happened to Sonic and Tails.

One second they were heading along the electrical cable tunnel. The next, they were being hoisted into the air. And very shortly after that, they found themselves stuffed inside sacks which were then tied up so tightly that they had no chance of escaping. There were squeaky, muttering voices all around them, but they couldn't make out what the rats were saying because the sacks, which incidentally were rather grubby and smelt of oily fish, muffled out all the sound.

The really gross thing, however, was being dragged along the passages after the rats. The floors were bumpy and it was absolutely no fun at all. For quite a long time.

Finally, by the time they were both gasping for air and wishing that they had gone to bed for the rest of the day with a pile of comics and a bucket of chicken instead of attempting all this hero stuff, they were hauled out of the sacks and very swiftly tied up hand and foot. Whiskered faces twitched all around them. Taking in their surroundings, Sonic and Tails found themselves in a huge, very dimly lit underground chamber. There were pipes and tubes everywhere and some of them leaked evilly coloured liquids which smelled unspeakably gross. They were surrounded by hundreds of rats. Behind the crowd, in the distance, one huge, fat, sleek brown rat with some streaks of gray in his fur and some seriously menacing shades stood regarding them expressionlessly.

‘Well, well, what have we here?,’ the big rat said ominously. He kind of sneered when he talked.

‘I'm Sonic the world-famous hedgehog and —’

The rats burst into laughter. At a single wave of the hand from the big rat, they fell instantly silent. The big rat advanced, ominously slowly.

‘Oh really? Well, I’ve never heard of you, you spiny blue freak,’ he yelled. ‘Now listen up and get smart, buster. I’m Capone, and I’m the King here. Call me Your Gracious Majesty or I’ll stick those little red sneakers where the sun don’t shine.’ The other rats growled with delighted laughter; Capone certainly knew how to work a room.

‘Another King!’ Tails exclaimed. ‘Um, do *you* have a daughter with chronic eating problems, King Kay-pony?’

The big rat’s expression changed to one of puzzlement. ‘Yeah, but how do you know that, you gingery dork?’

Tails ignored the insult. It seemed like the best strategy when faced with a nasty King, since he was tied up. ‘I’m psychic, Your Gracious Majesty.’

‘Psychic, huh? So how come you didn’t foresee that we’d capture you so easily, you twin-tailed gimboid?’ The rats sniggered loudly.

‘Oh, that was deliberate, Yer Maj — I mean, Your Most Worshipful Graciously Dudish Megamajesty,’ Sonic hurriedly corrected himself. ‘We know that you rats prefer to kidnap people. It’s like, uh, some dudes shake hands or say “hello”. It’s cool, We didn’t want to put you off your rhythm, yeah?’

King Capone looked unsure for a second. Sonic pressed his advantage.

‘And we brought you pizza as a goodwill gift! My good friend and, uh, pagefox squire-type underling has a bag of the same. As a personal gift, Radical Majestic Ratdude.’ Tails wasn’t too happy about being described by Sonic as an underling, but he kept silent anyway.

The rats stirred as one and began chattering amongst themselves in anticipation. The King reached hungrily for Tail’s bag, then stopped himself.

‘Where’s my Food Taster?’ he growled suspiciously.

‘Here, Your Most Gracious Majesty.’ A thin and extremely nervous-looking rat popped up from the crowd.

‘Open that dweeb's bag and check it.’ Capone pointed imperiously to Tails.

The Food Taster rummaged in Tails's bag. ‘Pizza delivery indeed, Majesty.’

‘Eat it. Wait; only a little, little bit. Does it have anchovies?’ Capone's long, pink tongue licked at the edges of his lips.

‘Yes, Your Gracious Majesty.’

‘Save them for me. Eat just a little bit of the crust at the edge, where the cheese is thinnest.’

The Food Taster looked disappointed. He looked like the kind of rat who got disappointed an awful lot. ‘Very good, Majesty.’ He broke off a small pawful of pizza and chewed it for a few seconds, then swallowed it.

The King waited for a moment or so. Everyone was hushed.

‘Well? Is it poisoned? Are you dead?’

‘No, Your Majesty, Erm, perhaps I ought to try a little more, just to be absolutely certain. I might be dead and not have realised it yet,’ said the Food Taster hopefully.

‘Don't try to pull that one again or you'll be at the bottom of the bottomest sewer wearing a concrete tail-warmer, you get me?’ King Capone kicked him aside and sank his teeth into the pizza. His face was only centimetres away from Tails, who quickly learned that rats, or King Rats anyway, have two very long, very yellow, and very sharp front teeth. They also have appallingly bad breath. Tails tried not to feel sick.

‘Well,’ said the King through a mouthful of pizza, ‘you jerks sure tried very hard. But you made one serious mistake, you creeps.’

‘What was that?’ Sonic exclaimed.

‘You forgot the olives.’



The rats with the sharp suits, dark glasses and violin cases had startled them, that's for sure. They just walked right up in a line, stood in front of the tied-up prisoners, put on white gloves, and opened the violin cases.



Sonic and Tails didn't have to get so scared. The rats actually played their instruments quite well.

But they kept them tied up for hours and, wriggle as hard as they could, there really wasn't any escape. King Capone was talking to some other large rats, clearly discussing what to do with his prisoners. After endless talks, Capone came over to talk to them again.

‘Well, morons, we’ve had a conference, and they — that is, I — I have decided that you are going to tell Capone exactly why you are really here.’

‘Well, Your Gracious Majesty,’ (Sonic had finally got it right, but then again, he had had lots of time to practice), ‘I’m sorry to have to tell you that that’s a secret. It’s a secret so secret that the whole future of Mobius depends on it. Including Your Gracious Majesty and his subjects. It is a secret known to very, very few people. Which is why it’s a secret.’

‘Oh, so you’re going to try to stop Robotnik building his Transmogri-fier then?’ Capone said in a very offhand way.

‘Um, um, um... Um, yes.’ Right at that moment Sonic couldn’t think of anything else to say.

‘Well, look at it from our point of view,’ Capone continued, apparently oblivious to Sonic’s embarrassment at the revelation of his allegedly great secret. ‘We have actually noticed that Robotnik is building an enormous anti-hedgehog defensive shield around the Metropolis. Now, that wouldn’t be to keep a world-famous hedgehog like yourself out, would it?’

‘What, little old me?’ said Sonic innocently.

‘And it wouldn’t be you that Robotnik has a huge reward out for capturing, would it?’

‘Oh, I hardly think so.’ Try as he might to hide it, a small smirk of pleasure began forming on Sonic’s lips.

‘Hmmm. Well, anyway, fatso Robotnik is no enemy of ours. Many of us have worked for him, you know.’

‘Yes, but isn’t there a small problem with, er, nasty ratniks?’

Many of the rats standing behind their King hissed and preened their whiskers angrily. There were a lot of sharp yellow teeth suddenly gleaming in the dim Undercity light.

‘So you know about that, do you, you red-sneakered freak?’

‘I know many things.’ Sonic decided to play inscrutable.

‘Don't you try to play inscrutable with me,’ Capone growled, pointing a stubby, claw-tipped finger at the hedgehog. ‘We just *might* let you go. Just possibly.’ Tails and Sonic breathed a sigh of relief.

‘But of course we'll demand some service from you first. You did enter our area of the Undercity without Royal Permission, and that's the Crime of Trespass.’

The rats behind hissed again. Voices could be heard whispering softly, ‘Crime of Trespass! Oh yes!’ Sonic and Tails didn't mind that too much. It was the anonymous voice shouting ‘Cut off their paws!’ which rather more concerned them.

‘So, you're going to bust into the Pizza Factory Plant for us, as a way of atoning for your heinous crime. It's not difficult. There are only about two thousand worker robots, a thousand guard robots, defence systems which not even we can get into, and other things like that.’

Sonic seemed comfortable with this idea. ‘Sounds a breeze. We'll be able to do that for you easily. With extra olives?’ Sonic enquired. These rats must be dumb. As soon as he and Tails were out of here, they were *out of here* and they weren't going to waste time raiding any Pizza Plant. Well, maybe for a quick snack, but nothing more. Certainly not just so a gang of halitosis-suffering sewer rats with severe personal hygiene problems could stuff their dirty-whiskered face-pouches, anyway.

‘We? WE? Look, chum: you're a world-famous hedgehog, right? You can surely do this little teensy-weensy thing alone, can't you?’

‘My buddy is brilliant when it comes to dealing with alarms and there's nothing about pizza he doesn't know.’ Sonic was lying through his teeth. Well, about the first part.

‘You must think that we're dumb,’ Capone snarled.

Oh-oh, thought Sonic, I have bad vibes about this...

‘We're keeping furry freak features here as a hostage. We let you go. You come back with pizza, by the tonne. If you don't, your furry freak pal here gets it.’ From his ragged fur, Capone drew out a long, vicious metal pin with a *very* sharp end and held it awfully close to Tails, who shrank back in not unreasonable fright. ‘And don't try any heroic rescues, buster. We'll have guards round him night and day. One false move and he's fox *history*. Get it?’

‘Okay okay. Where's this Pizza Plant?’ Sonic said weakly. This wasn't going to be easy.

# **21**

## **PIZZA RAID**

### **(WITH EXTRA OLIVES)**

Sonic pushed up the drain hatch. It was very smelly indeed down here, and he wanted to get out as quickly as was hedgehogly possible. Sonic hated bad smells more than almost anything in the whole world.

Finding himself in the back yard of the huge Pizza Plant, he looked around himself very swiftly. The place seemed to be deserted. There were lorries and huge pallets stacked around, and a heavy chain fence around the factory. There was also just one back door. Robotnik might have pizzas manufactured here, but there wasn't any hope of counter service.

Sonic felt miserable and dejected for a moment. He missed Tails. He'd grown used to his little buddy, and he didn't trust the rats to treat him properly. That made him suddenly feel very angry. His feet started to tap, then he began to run towards the door.

One splintered door later, the guard robots of the Dough Room were instantly on full alert. Fortunately for Sonic, they weren't among Robotnik's best creations. Most of the really powerful guard robots had been moved to the Transmogriplex already. But there were still bouncing Ball Hogs, wizzing Buzz Bombers, and even a few really dangerous Rollers, heading right across the floor towards the intruder. Sonic went straight into Super Spin. There was no time to waste.

'Ten thousand pizzas to go, heavy on the anchovies and the olives. Oh yeah, and one portion of garlic bread supreme,' Sonic yelled, and the battle was joined.

Leaping, crushing, bashing and leaving a trail of mayhem behind him, Sonic knew this strategy just wasn't going to work. There were just too many of them. Narrowly dodging the sting of a Buzz Bomber, he had an instant brainwave. Hurtling towards the enormous dough vat in the centre of the factory, with a mighty heave he disconnected the huge hose leading

from it. Pushing the lever on the vat to 'MAXIMUM', he hefted the hose and pointed it at the squadron of Buzz Bombers bearing down at him.

An enormous lengthy string of dough fired from the machine. It wrapped right around the robots, trapping their wings and leaving them flapping helplessly on the ground. The Rollers, however, were still advancing on Sonic.

'Hey, dweebs, dough-n't get too close!' Sonic yelled gleefully as the hose fired out long bullets of sticky dough. The Rollers got engulfed, and rolled themselves to a stand-still, covered all over in the thick floury pizza base.

They look just like doughnuts, Sonic thought. The Ball Hogs soon got swamped in the endless stream of dough which the vat supplied, and by the time the vat was emptied the entire factory was a metre deep in the stuff.

Sonic looked around for the assembly line. There were lots of hatches and doors in the factory room, so he just took pot luck and charged the one furthest away to the one he'd entered by.

Bursting through the door, Sonic found himself sliding down a long floury chute towards a sunken floor littered with an array of metal vats with open tops. He could see bubbling cheese, tomato puree, olives and lots of other toppings, simmering away before him. Sonic licked his lips, and lost his concentration. He hit a big patch of flour halfway down the chute and kicked up a spray of fine, white, choking flour.

'Ah... ah... ah... aaahhhh... ATCHOOOOOO!' Sonic leapt into the air with the force of the sneeze. Spiralling over and over in mid-air, he landed with a heavy *SPLAPPP!!* in the tomato puree.

There was silence for a moment, and the surface of the puree returned to its more usual gentle bubbling. Then, with a mighty heave, a bright red figure covered from head to foot in dripping tomato sauce burst from the vat and landed in a gooey heap on the floor beside it.

Sonic lay still for a few seconds, before some special sense told him he'd better look up, like, now. Charging at him, from the far side of the room where a row of large hatchways were cut into the wall, was a whole squad of Grabbers, the eight-legged robots with nasty, nipping jaws.

Sonic was grabbed. More than once. But the metal nippers just slipped off the thick, slippery tomato puree and the robots couldn't hold him. Sonic gave them a series of perfectly aimed kicks from a Super Spin and watched them sail through the air into the mozzarella vat.

'Boy, those Grabbers must be cheesed off,' he punned happily. Doing his best to wipe off some of the tomatoey gunge covering him, he sprinted for the hatchway. Slipping on a final puddle of puree, he half-flew and half-slid across the nearest hatchway and into the brilliantly lit distance.

For a moment, his eyes were blinded and he couldn't make out where he was. It was the movement, however, that gave it away; something underneath him was moving and he was moving along with it. He realised, by screwing up his dazzled eyes and squinting to take in the fact that he was in the middle of a long queue of topping-less pizzas, that he was on a conveyor belt. In the near distance the belt passed into a long metal cylinder, into which a whole series of tubes passed from the toppings room. Unfortunately, by the time he had realised this, there was no time left for Sonic to get off the belt.

When he emerged from the far side of the cylinder, a Hot 'n' Spicy Sonic with extra sweetcorn and spiced beef, and very heavy on the cheese, stepped rather unsteadily off the conveyor belt and did his best to divest himself of his toppings, partly through wiping but mostly, it must be admitted, by simply eating. There didn't seem to be any Grabbers here, or any other robots for that matter, but on the other hand if he hadn't moved when he had done, he would have been cooking nicely at 300 degrees by now. It had been a narrow escape.

Keeping his wits about him, Sonic crossed to the entry valve labelled 'OLIVES' and turned the dial from Normal, through Heavy, and all the way up to Grossout. He even remembered to top up the cheese and keep the anchovies flowing. Real rat-on pizzas, dude, he complimented himself.

Grabbing some pizza bases to smear the last of the cheese and chilli sauce from himself, Sonic looked around eagerly. He needed a couple of hundred pizza boxes and some way of delivering them to the Undercity and the rats, and that wasn't going to be so easy. Standing at the far end of the assembly line, grabbing the pizzas as they came off it, Sonic rapidly

built up a huge pile of steaming pizzas freshly boxed. Somehow, he managed to only eat three of them himself!

‘I’ve got to get these out of here somehow,’ he said to himself as he stacked, keen to jog his pizza-addled brain into coming up with a solution. But how?

Disturbing his thoughts, a low metallic grinding sound came from a door opening in the distance. Sonic hid underneath the assembly line to watch.

A large, faceless and featureless robot clanked into the room, grabbed the huge stack of filled pizza boxes in its shovel-like claws and dumped them on to a metal pallet. The pallet hissed and rose gently into the air. The robot pressed a lever on it, and the pallet turned round and gently glided through the doorway. The robot followed the pallet and was about to close the door when a superfast hedgehog sprinted past, leapt on to the pallet and pressed the lever all the way up to maximum.

The pallet rose crazily into the air, rocking slightly from side to side. Sonic had to keep running round trying to catch the pizzas which were in danger of falling off it. Leaping and dashing around, he found a second lever on the far side of the pallet. Let’s hope this is a rudder, he thought to himself, and pointed it to the far side of the metropolis. The pallet suddenly hurtled off through the night sky.

Afterwards, Sonic wasn’t entirely sure just how he managed to land the pallet without doing too much damage to himself, the pizzas or anything else. Well, crash land it, to be more exact. All he knew was that he was lying on the ground, with stars swimming round his head, and beside him was a pallet sticking out of the ground at right angles and a huge number of pizza boxes scattered all around. Rubbing his head, he rose groggily to his feet and started to dust off his sneakers and try to get his sticky spines back in shape. Sonic always did the important stuff first!

The patter of not-so-tiny pink paws brought him to his senses. A large group of rats had turned up, somehow knowing exactly where to find him, and they were busy carting off the pizzas down into the mound Stevie the mole had made, and presumably on down into the Undercity. Capone towered over him, accompanied by a haughty-looking girl-rat with a funny

feathery scarf and something silk wrapped around her, idly fingering at a big diamond ring on her left paw.

‘These are the olivest, olive-heavy, olive-rich pizzas we've seen for a long time, deservedly so-called world-famous hedgehog. With a very acceptable amount of cheese and anchovy. I think we just cut ourselves a deal, buster.’

The rat babe cooed into Capone's ear. ‘Oh, and Dolores says your spikes look really grotty, dude.’

Sonic groaned. All this for a few hundred pizzas and his spikes still stuck solidly to his back with the last of the congealed tomato puree. Sometimes life was really hard being a heroic blue hedgehog.



## **22**

# **WORLD-FAMOUS HEDGEHOG IN VIDEO SENSATION!**

The rats of the Metropolis weren't too strong on the personal hygiene front. As a result, it took Sonic a long time to wash himself off and restore himself to his proper glory. Meanwhile, Capone was distributing pizzas to his hench-men. It looked as if one or two fights might break out among the rats as they argued over who should get the biggest slices, but finally they quietened down, licked the last of the pizza off their paws, and sat around in a large circle. Capone parked himself right in the middle of it and gestured to Sonic and the newly-untied Tails to sit before him. Sonic was expecting at least a few cheers from the porked-out rats when he swaggered into the circle, but to his disappointment there weren't any at all. Just one or two burps. Well, rats don't have all that great table manners.

‘Well, world-famous hedgehog, now you want our help with finding Robotnik's master laboratory in the Metropolis.’ Capone was picking at his over-long claws, speaking in very casual tone of voice.

‘That, I believe, was the deal, Oh Royal Megadude.’ Sonic was hopeful.

‘Your Gracious Majesty, if you don't mind. Actually, that was not the deal. I said that I might let you go if you raided the Pizza Plant for us.’ Capone had a very good memory. He needed one, to remember all the enemies he had on his list of creatures who he planned to have disappear from the Metropolis.

‘Ah, well um, yes, Your Gracious Majesty. But since we were heading for Robotnik's laboratory, it was implicit that that meant releasing us in the general direction of same.’ Sonic had been thinking through this one for a long time. Capone was one mean rat and Sonic needed all his smarts to deal with him. But just thinking up a word like ‘implicit’ had taken him an

awful lot of tiring brainwork and he didn't have very much left for reasoning with.

‘Oh, very clever,’ snarled the huge rat. ‘Have you ever read a book called the Very Grim Fairy Tales?’

‘Don't think so. Is there a video of it?’

‘Probably. Anyway, there's a story about a hedgehog who's too smart for himself and thinks he's cleverer than he is. And of course he comes to a *very* nasty end. Something to do with balls of clay, a very hot oven and some unusual school of cuisine. You ought to read it, buster.’

A few of the other rats sniggered. About two of them sniggered because they'd heard the fairy tale. The others sniggered because they were afraid that if they didn't, Capone would have their whiskers cut off. He was one *mean* King.

‘Thank you for that literary advice, Your Gracious Majesty,’ Sonic said politely. ‘But what are we going to do now?’

‘Well, as a sign of our most gracious and generous majesty we shall release you somewhere close to the Transmogriplex.’

‘How close would that be, exactly?’ Tails piped up.

‘Ooh, I don't know about “exactly”, exactly, but I would say somewhere between right next door and the other side of the city.’ Capone smirked. He didn't look terribly pleasant when he smirked. Well, actually, he never looked anywhere near pleasant, but when he smirked he looked really *slimy*.

‘That is very helpful of you, Most Gracious Majesty, sir.’ Sonic was beginning to realise that all he and Tails could hope for was just to get out of here and away from the rats.

‘Dillinger! Scarface! Take these *gentlemen*,’ Capone sneered, ‘and let them out at Duct 32.’

‘Oh no! Not Duct 32!’ gasped an impressionable rat somewhere at the back of the crowd.

‘Oh yes! Duct 32. Then we shall see if this really is a world-famous hedgehog.’



The two rats leading the way were mean-looking dudes. One snarled most of the time, and the other one had an ugly scar running right the way down the left side of his face. They didn't say anything much, but just scrambled on ahead through a long series of tunnels, passages and narrow chutes. Finally, they stood at the bottom of a rising metal chute stuffed full of wires and cables and pointed upwards. Sonic thought he heard one say to the other, 'Why do you think Sonic crossed the road?,' and he did his best to look really snarly and fierce when the rats turned back to him. It was an old joke, and it wasn't funny any more.

'Up dere, buster,' snarled the one who snarled all the time. Sonic assumed he was Dillinger. Well, it wouldn't have made much sense if he was Scarface. On the other hand, you never knew where you were with these double-crossing rats.

'Like, most total thanks, dudes. I don't suppose you'd like to, um, chew through a couple of cables to mess up the electricity supply up there would you?' It was a long shot. Somehow, Sonic didn't think Sally's suggestion would work.

The rats sniggered nastily. 'What wud we wanna do that for? We've just stuffed ourselves full of pizza, buster.'

'Well, thanks anyway,' Sonic replied, rather lamely.

'Huh,' snarled Dillinger, popping another wad of chewing gum into his mouth. 'Best of luck, suckers.' With an evil laugh, he and Scarface disappeared back down the gloomy passages of the Undercity.

'Well, Tails, we have two choices. Numero uno, we can go up here. Numero, um, numero two-oh, we can keep going and try somewhere else.' Sonic didn't exactly sound happy about either option.

'Well, Sonic, at least this gets us into the city. If we go on we might be kidnapped by some other gang of rats. Or bump into the ratniks. Or the alligators everyone says are down here. Or some of Robotnik's machines or traps. Or, even worse —'

'Yeah, okay, got the idea,' Sonic snapped testily. He didn't want to think about the traps and dangers further along.

‘Let's move on up, dude. I have a bad feeling about this. What did that Capone mean about finding out if I was really a world-famous hedgehog?’



‘Where are we?’ Tails lamented. He'd never been anywhere like this before.

He and Sonic had burst out of the metal hatches at the top of the duct, raced along what had seemed like kilometres of narrow cable ducts and finally opened a metal grille and found themselves in a metal room covered in pipes and wires. In front of them was a door with a large red bulb glowing brightly outside it, and a panel which read ‘STUDIO ENGAGED’.

‘Hmm. Studio, huh? Must be some kind of painter or artist, I suppose. They have studios, don't they?’ Sonic didn't know much about Art, but he knew what he liked. And he didn't like the peculiar sounds coming from the radio on the wall opposite him.

‘This is Radio Fish on 222 AM, broadcasting the groovy sounds of the Metropolis. Now it's DJ Marc Dweeb with “Robot Fun Time” for all you hard workers out there. Same plaice, same time on 222! E'el keep you amused. Here's our first tune-ah, *Whale Keep Rapping* by Dicky Snapper and the Sharks!’

‘What is this drivel?’ Tails wondered.

‘Dunno. Really grody though. Never mind that, let's see what's behind this other door.’ Sonic accelerated into door-crashing mode. It always seemed easier than just opening them, somehow, and it was always far more fun.

The lights were very bright in the room beyond and Sonic had to blink a few times to take in the scene around him. It was very strange. He couldn't see all of the room, because beyond a ring of very powerful lights there was just darkness. But, in the middle of the lights, he could see a whole bunch of video cameras standing on tripods. They were all pointed at a couple of very expensive and luxurious leatherette chairs. In one of the chairs a weird-looking robot was sitting. It was vaguely human-shaped and it seemed to have been sprayed with latex or something like that. It had a

ridiculously over-perfect human face and was dressed in a very expensive suit. Sonic was fazed by that. In his experience, robots didn't wear suits. The robot looked vaguely startled for a second, and then grinned very widely. It had a infinite number of absurdly white teeth.

‘Good evening, fans! This is Bobby Smile, Master of Charm and Smarm, bringing *you* tonight's *Chat With Smile!!*’ Somewhere in the darkness, applause burst out. It lasted for 12 seconds and then stopped abruptly, as if someone had turned off a switch.

‘And tonight's first guest is, er —’

Sonic thought he could see little trickles of oil coming from the robot's joints, and he didn't like it much. But he'd figured it out now! This was a video studio, a chat show, and *he* was going to be the star! Swaggering forward and bowing to the audience he thought must be there, he plonked himself in the chair next to Smile.

‘Sonic's the name, Bobby. Sonic the Hedgehog. World-famous superdude!’

‘Urrghh, yes, Sonic! Well, welcome to the show, Sonic.’ The robot was clearly confused. ‘And, ah, what's it like being such a blue dude then?’

‘Well, Bobby, I have to say that my agent says it's a cool image and, like, it's just me being myself, dude.’

‘Yeah, great! Well, ah, Sonic, how about the new movie you're making with ace director Clint Deadbrain? And are those rumours about you and your leading starlet true?’

‘Well, Barry, I have to say that Clint is the best director I've ever had the pleasure of working with. He's, like, one radical dude, yeah? He's sure come on a lot since he did that pathetic movie with that dumb, fat Italian waiter or whatever he was. Now Clint's real cool about his choice of characters to work with.’ Sonic was babbling the kind of drivel he'd seen on TV and video. It seemed to be working. Getting into this had seemed a good idea at first, but now he was beginning to wonder...

‘Oh, and Barry, like, we radical hedgehog superstars never kiss and tell, right?’



Tails was horrified. He realised that somewhere in the Metropolis, one of Robotnik's minions would surely be monitoring this show. The mad scientist would soon send some humungous force of robots to destroy them. He had to get Sonic out of the studio somehow. But he just couldn't rush right in and drag him out. That would make matters even worse. Desperately racking his brains, he was infuriated by the garbage coming from the radio.

'Now for the hard of herring, just turn Marc Dweeb UP UP UP and let's rark and roll!' Another awful record began to play, then it began to slow down and stopped. There was a moment of merciful silence, and then...

'Sorry about that, groove-o-dudes! We didn't do it on porpoise. Whale try to put things right as soon as possible.'

What *is* all this stuff about fish? Tails wondered. Then he took a closer look at the radio...



Tails raced into the studio. He was over-excited and he didn't care about making things worse now. He reckoned things couldn't get much worse anyway. Bobby Smile looked up in alarm.

'Emergency message for superstar Sonic! Red hot property up-and-comin' director Tux Iceberg needs to contract him for an ace new movie NOW!!!!' Tails jumped up and down and tried to drag Sonic out of his chair.

Sonic resisted at first and then shook his head as if clearing his mind. Tux *who*? TUX!!!!??

'Hey, Bobby, it's been really great and I mean that most sincerely. But the world of tinsel and glitter beckons and hey, dude, when you gotta go you gotta go, right? *Adios muchos, nachos. Hasta la er*, well hasta less pasta or whatever they say down there. Byeeee!'

Accompanied by another deafening round of canned applause, Sonic dashed off with Tails back into the darkness offstage.

'What on Mobius were you doing, Sonic? Now Robotnik's bound to

know we're here!'

'Woah, sorry little dude. But it was kind of fun. Hey, you said *Tux*?'

'Yeah. Look at that radio.'

Sonic looked carefully. The radio was black and white, and down its side it had kind of flipper-shaped designs and if you looked really carefully at the yellow tuner dial there was something which looked suspiciously like a beak. Sonic stared for a moment, unsure of what exactly he was meant to be looking at. Then it hit him.

'Oh, heinous! You mean *that* is our penguin-style friend?'

'Listen. But not for long. We don't have much time.'

After a few more jingles and intros in which the names of fish were conspicuously present, Sonic looked aghast. There was no doubt about it.

'It really *is* him! He's been transmogrified into a radio! This is terrible news! Well, buddy, we've got to go. Grab that penguin-radio and let's head on out. There's no time to waste.'

## **23**

# **QUICK! ESCAPE WITH THE VACUUM-PIG!!**

Sonic had been on the live broadcast just a little too long. Outside the station, huge lorries could be heard drawing up, and then the ominous sound of metal clanking filled the building.

‘He’s sent some robots to get us! I knew this would happen! Oh, Sonic, why did you have to —’ Tails began moaning.

‘Shhh,’ Sonic shushed. ‘Keep quiet now. And turn Tux off too — sorry, Tux.’ The sound of metal doors swishing open was getting closer. The radio ceased its stream of inane comments as Tails switched the volume down and off.

‘Better get ready for some serious robot-smashing!’ Sonic was winding himself up for action. His spikes bristled.

‘Even better, actually, um, well, um, why don’t we try to get out of here?’ Tails didn’t think a head-on attack was the best option here. Not when they were unfamiliar with the layout of the building, and he said as much.

‘No harm searching for another way out,’ Sonic agreed. ‘Let’s move!’

Tails and Sonic followed corridors more or less blindly. The studio was a maze, and there weren’t any EXIT signs anywhere. All the time, the sound of trundling robots was getting nearer and nearer. Sonic wasn’t worried. He knew in his mind that he could stomp them. Hey! He was Sonic the Hedgehog: he thought he could stomp anything! That is, until he saw them face to face.

‘Oh, heavy bumper! Look!’ OK, so even hypercool hedgehogs have their limitations.

A squadron of slow-moving but deadly Bomb-Bots was advancing down the corridor, their metal antennae waving. They couldn’t detect Sonic and Tails except at really close range, but they couldn’t be safely crashed



either. Each one of them had a kilo of explosive inside it, and bashing one would mean instant destruction to the basher. Sonic and Tails had to run, and run fast.

‘In here!’ Tails was getting just a little panicky; well, he wasn't *quite* as cool as Sonic. Dragging Sonic into a tiny room behind an inconspicuous door, they sat with bated breath inside the odd-smelling, very dark room as the bots marched closer and closer and closer — and right on past. They waited until it was silent outside and then opened the door just a tiny bit to see the coast was clear outside.

With the light coming in from outside, they could see they'd taken shelter in a clean-up room. It was full of mops, buckets, pails, a couple of vacuum cleaners, and lots of jars and bottles of cleaning fluids. Twelve large tins of ROBOSHINE (*Brings a gleam to your machine!*), and a hundred-litre drum of robot oil lay in the far corner.

But outside... ‘Oh, seriously bad vibes. Neat trick, huh? I don't think.’ Sonic lamented.

Clearly, there hadn't just been Bomb-Bots outside. The floor, in all directions and as far as the hedgehog eye could see, was coated in a thick layer of powdery, flaky stuff Of some description. Sonic didn't know what it was but he realised at once that it was a great way of making sure they'd leave footprints behind them as they fled. What was more, strung along the corridor at just above hedgehog-head height was a huge network of sticky strands of web-like material. That, clearly, was going to put a stop to any indoor aviation.

‘Why does he need *that*?’ Tails complained. ‘I mean, he's got all those electronic alarms and robots and everything. This is a bit primitive, isn't it? So why bother?’

‘Because alarms can be destroyed if you bounce off them, silly. We do it all the time, and Robotnik knows it now. But this way, we cant cover up where we are and where we've been in the building. Think about it; if this powder had been on the floor when the Bomb-Bots had been after us, we'd have left a nice trail of footprints right up to the door. Right?’

Tails could see the sense of that. ‘So what can we do about it? We can't fly around. Whatever that messy stuff is, it looks as if it would glue

us up totally if we tried that.'

'Well...' Sonic started to look at the vacuum cleaners. 'Yes! I've got it. There is something we can try. Where can we plug this thing in?' He dragged the bigger one out of the corner. He was about to fit the plug into the socket panel he found on the far wall when he suddenly stood stock still and stared at the vacuum cleaner very intently indeed.

'Tails, quick, look at this. Does this vacuum cleaner... well, does it remind you of anyone we know?'

'Well, it's a bit pinkish. And those wheels have hubs that look a bit, well, like feet, sort of.' Tails pondered a moment or two longer. 'Turn it on.'

Sonic plugged in the cleaner and the bag filled with air. Tails nodded his head sadly.

'Oh dear. Yes, it does rather look like someone we know. It's definitely a bit porky, and it's that twirly tail-like bit at the end of the handle that gives it away really, isn't it?'

'Sonic, we can't do this! We can't clean the floor with Porker Lewis, even if he is a vacuum cleaner right at the moment!'

'The other one doesn't work.' Sonic shoved the broken vacuum cleaner to one side with a red-sneakered foot.

'But it's not like being a toa— a you-know-what. I mean, we're going to be filling him up with yucky grey powder! We don't even know what it is! It'll be awful for him.'

Sonic knelt down and spoke gently to the vacuum cleaner. 'Look, Porker my best buddy, I really am terribly, terribly sorry about this. Please try to understand. We freed Sally from Robotnik's laboratory. And we've found Tux, and you. And —'

'And Johnny Lighfoot as well. I think.' Tails rather sadly held up an unusual-looking mop. It was grubby and slightly grungy-smelling, and Tails was fairly sure that life had not been a bucket of roses for this mop of late.

'Right,' Sonic continued. 'Well then, and Johnny too. Now we have to try to get you to Robotnik's master laboratory and change you back. But

we've got to get out of here to do that, which means that we have to cover our tracks with you. I'm really sorry about this, Porker, but a hedgehog's got to do what a hedgehog's got to do.'

The vacuum cleaner seemed to wobble very slightly.

'Okay then, thanks old buddy. If it's any consolation,' Sonic continued, whispering very gently and close to the cleaner so that Tails couldn't overhear him, 'I've spent a little time as a toaster myself. So I sort of know what it's like.'

The vacuum cleaner seemed to snigger a bit. Well, not really, but just for a second Sonic thought that it did. Perhaps he was just imagining things, but it seemed to make his decision easier.

'It's a good thing Porker has a long lead,' Sonic observed. 'Okay, Tails, open the door and let's get cleaning.'



Charging ahead with a roaring Porker sweeping all before him, Tails and Sonic sailed along the studio corridors and finally, just when they thought that Porker's lead must run out and they'd be left without a plugged-in vacuum-pig, they found the back door. Some guys really do have all the luck. Switching Porker off, Sonic took a flying jump and battered it down.

'Free! Free at last! Now —'

Twenty billion megavolts of arc lights switched on at the same time. Blinded and unable to react, Sonic and Tails stood almost frozen, stock still. Camera shutters clicked open. Dimly, beyond the halo of intense white light, Sonic thought he could just see, with shielded eyes, a very fat egg-shaped person sitting in a large canvas chair, surrounded by robot guards. Egg-features raised a huge megaphone to his mouth and began to shout.

'My lords, ladies and gentlemen! Tonight is the world premier of a new play by the ten-times winner of the Mobius Prize for Literature and Good Playwrighting, Dr Ivo Robotnik! On the set are the lead actors in *Death Of A Hedgehog!!*'

‘Quick,’ Sonic gasped, ‘Let's grab this vacuum pig and run! Better still, fly!’

Spinning and leaping, Sonic and Tails dodged away from the advancing robot horde. Robotnik's caterpillar-treaded Grounders were being followed by the spiked, segmented Crawlton legion, and there was the drone of something else advancing from above. A hail of flying stingers flew past our heroes' heads.

‘Uh oh!’ Sonic and Tails found to their horror they had ascended right into a huge swarm of Buzz Bombers. This time, it really did look like it was all over. They were surrounded. Robotnik screamed with glee. They were up against *hundreds* of robots.

‘More lights! More cameras! More action! *Action!!!* Ha ha ha ha ha haaaa!’ Robotnik wobbled horridly and almost fell out of his heftily supported chair.

A stinger fired from a Buzz Bomber missed Sonic's spines by half a centimetre and hit Porker's switch, knocking it neatly to ‘BLOW’. The machine wasn't plugged in anywhere, but plainly Porker had found a small reserve of energy and was using it to their advantage.

‘Yay Porker!’ cheered Tails.

An enormous cloud of dust emerged from the base of the vacuum cleaner, smothering almost everything in sight. The Buzz Bombers couldn't see their targets properly, and the ground bots were circling aimlessly around, though Sonic and Tails soon lost sight of them themselves. They could hear Robotnik coughing and spluttering somewhere nearby, but they couldn't see him (which to be quite honest was something of a bonus).

‘Come on! Out of here!’ Sonic ordered.

‘Where? Where to?’ Tails was losing his cool. It was as much as he could do to keep hold of the mop and the radio.

‘Anywhere! Just follow me!’ Swooping past the last of the Buzz Bombers and leaving a furious and choking Robotnik behind, the superdudes flew off into the night. It didn't seem to matter too much where they were heading. As long as it was out of here.

## 24

# THAT ROBOT'S GOT PROBLEMS

‘What do you reckon this place is, then?’ Tails queried.

‘It's somewhere good. First, it's on the edge of the city. Second, it's quiet. Third, it's totally deserted. That makes it a good place in my book,’ Sonic said.

‘We don't know it's deserted!’ Tails replied.

‘Don't quibble over details, Tails. And fourth, it has a door we can smash down.’ Sonic's toe was tapping again.

‘We don't know that we can smash —’ Tails was interrupted in mid-sentence. He changed the ending. ‘Oh all right, so you can smash it down then. But what's inside?’

It looked like a warehouse for spare robot parts. There were huge pallets loaded with great crates and packing boxes with stencilled labels on them. The labels had names like ‘Buzzer Heads’ and ‘Newtron Tails’, which rather gave the game away. Sonic and Tails looked across the long line of stacked crates. It seemed pretty quiet in here.

‘Do you think we could build our own robots and attack smelly old Robotnik with them?’ Tails said hopefully.

‘Shouldn't think so, little buddy. I'm sure that the control systems in them would make them obey only Robotnik. It's not like the old days when he had to use animals and living creatures inside them. Now they're just robots, I'm afraid.’ Sonic sat down on a crate and took stock of things.

‘Okay. We've got forty-one assorted packs of crisps, chips, nuts, nachos and tortilla chips and a couple of cold pizzas I hid from the rats. That'll keep us going for an hour at least. Well maybe, if we don't get peckish. And we have one radio, one mop and one vacuum cleaner. We still have to find — well, we don't really know exactly what we still have to find. What can that monster have turned our other friends into?’

That was still the problem. Not knowing what had happened to Joe and Flicky, Sonic still didn't know just what to look for. The vacuum cleaner wobbled a little. Sonic and Tails didn't notice.

‘We've just got no way of knowing. We don't know what they are, or where they are,’ Tails said ruefully, cleaning his whiskers.

The vacuum cleaner wobbled a bit more, but its friends were too busy thinking to notice this time either. Which goes to show that perhaps thinking is not always a good idea.

‘Is there anything in common? Toaster, mop, radio, vacuum cleaner... can't imagine what the others might be. Everyone seems to have changed into something different. I suppose the mop and the vacuum cleaner are a bit similar. Perhaps we ought to be looking for a carpet shampooing machine?’ Sonic pondered.

The vacuum cleaner rocked from side to side.

‘I think I felt a bit like something made of chromium and all stiff and solid when he turned the ray on me,’ Tails said uncertainly. ‘And a bit bubbly. I don't know if that's a clue or not. I don't really want to think about it much more.’

The vacuum cleaner jumped up and down a couple of times. It was getting to be a very frustrated vacuum cleaner by now. At last, though, Sonic noticed it.

‘Hey! Look at Porker! Did you see that?’

Thank heavens for that, I thought they'd *never* notice, the vacuum cleaner reflected, which to be quite honest is quite a feat for an unplugged domestic cleaning appliance. Now I think I have just enough dust left...

‘Plug him in. I think he's trying to tell us something,’ Sonic said.

A few seconds later, the vacuum cleaner was burrrring happily but not obviously doing anything unusual.

‘Well, maybe we were wrong. Perhaps it was just some king of electrical fault. The other one was broken, after all.’

The vacuum cleaner jumped up and down again.

‘Okay okay, chill, Mr Vacuum Cleaner Dude,’ Sonic smoothed hastily.

‘Yeah, so it isn't a fault. It is Porker and he's trying to tell us something,’ Tails admitted.

‘Tails, I really don't think I know how to talk to vacuum cleaners. Even when they're among my best friends.’

‘I wonder,’ Tails suggested, ‘if we fitted the attachment for cleaning stair carpets and curtains and furniture and all that stuff? It would be logical. It's what Porker does when he cleans his house.’

Sonic fitted the long, narrow tube attachment to Porker. Immediately, a small puff of dust emerged.

‘Got it! He can write messages in dust! Great! Now, listen, Porker. We're going to fill your dust bag so you can tell us everything you know. Okay?’

The vacuum cleaner puffed out a little more dust. Sonic guessed that Porker was saying, ‘Okay.’ He didn't have any real way of knowing, but this just wasn't the time to worry too much about points of detail. It was one of those ‘It works, as long as you don't think too hard about it’ moments.

‘Well, Tails, it's time for one more waltz around the floor doing some radically unexpected spring cleaning!’



‘There's something wrong with my circuits,’ Eggor panicked to himself. ‘What's happening to me?’

He tried to find Dr Robotnik, but Robotnik wasn't in his office. The computer flashed up a message about him being out directing a new play. Eggor was very confused. By swiftly checking where Robotnik's robot hit squads had been despatched, he tracked down his Master.

I must do something to please the Master, Eggor thought. I know! I'll destroy that Sonic the hedgehog pest. That'll get me back in his good books. If he has any good books.

Taking the transmogrifying ray-gun prototype, Eggor clanked to the doorway. Passing through hatches and passages without encountering anyone or anything, the robot finally stood outside a building for the first time in his robotic life and headed down the roboway to the media centre. He fantasised about becoming a major robot movie star, maybe like Robot Di Nero. That worried him a little as well. Everything seemed to be worrying him at the moment. Good Robots weren't supposed to want to be movie stars, not if they worked in Dr Robotnik's computer centres.

He was too late. He got to the media studios just as Sonic and Tails left Robotnik and his bots scattered and confused. Watching from a distance, well outside the dust cloud, Eggor marched off to one side and observed carefully where Sonic and Tails flew off to. Purposely clanking his way through the endless underpasses of the Metropolis, Eggor advanced on his prey. Master would forgive him for his malfunctions. Master would be happy with him. He'd be upgraded and, as a Mark II Eggor, everything would be all right. Probably.



Sonic and Tails reviewed the messages Porker had spread in fine dust lines all over the floor he had cleaned so perfectly. Porker clearly made an excellent cleaning device, which wasn't all that surprising given his personality.

‘So, Flicky had been turned into a popcorn cooker and dispenser over at the Grot-o-Rama cinema. What a life. And Joe Sushi is a *console*?’

‘Seems unlikely doesn't it? But I bet we'd get lots of extra lives and replays if we played on him!’ Despite himself, Tails was rather looking forward to the idea. He was also getting very restless and he wanted to come down. Sonic had made him perch really high up on the top of a stack of crates right by the entrance. From up there, he could read the letters Porker had spelled out more easily.

‘Can I come down now?’ he pleaded.

‘Wait a minute. There might be something else we could ask Porker.’ Sonic stopped to think for a second. This time, it was a good idea.



There was a clanking noise from the doorway. Silhouetted in the darkness stood Eggor, with the transmogrifying gun pointed right at Sonic.

‘Master is good! I shall please Master! Now you will be a harmless toaster again!’ The startled hedgehog was already caught in the ray, paralysed. The shape of a toaster was already beginning to appear.

Tails leapt down from the boxes and knocked Eggor over with a rather splendid flying drop kick which seemed to indicate that, if heroing ever dried up, Tails always had a career to fall back on as a professional wrestler. As the robot fell to the ground with a very surprised expression on his metal face, Tails grabbed the ray gun and switched it frantically to REVERSE. The ray seemed almost to invert itself, but then it flickered and went out.

‘Oh no! Sonic! Buddy!’ Tails was distraught.

It was cool; his pal was behind him, and even the most casual of relieved glances could tell he was the same old Sonic we all know and love. ‘I’m okay! Well done!’

‘And I’m okay too!’ beamed Porker Lewis happily, back to his old self.

‘And me too!’ piped up Tux, surprisingly, plainly no longer a radio.

‘I’m not. I’m really smelly and it’s just been awful being a broom. Ugh! The things I’ve had to clean up.’ Johnny Lightfoot groaned, holding his now fully restored nose.

‘Tails! Behind you!’ Sonic was already racing to defend his friend from the advancing Eggor. But, strangely, the robot stood still in mid-pace. It spoke very slowly, and seemed to be arguing with itself.

‘Bad Robot. Bad Robot. Master will be angry. *Oh, that’s one cool babe!* No! No! *Oh yes, yes!*’

‘It’s gone crazy. Its brain must be melting down or something. Quick, let’s smash it!’ Tails yelled eagerly.

‘No.’ Sonic was insistent. ‘Look, It’s Robotnik’s pet laboratory robot, right? I bet he’s got some specially horrible traps inside it. Maybe bombs or something. It’s too dangerous. Let’s just leave it here. We’ve got to find our other friends!’

The animals scattered through the back door, leaving the muttering robot and the ruined ray gun behind them.

Alone again, Eggor tried to engage his amnesia circuits. It was the best defence he had, but he still couldn't wipe that one, squirrellish, face from his memory. Clunking slowly away, he began to stagger back to Robotnik's laboratory. If only Sonic and Tails had followed him, they'd have known exactly where that was, of course. But their minds were full of friends who were popcorn toasters and, let's face it, when your mind is full of something like that, the easy, logical stuff tends to go out the window.

# 25

## THREE FOR THE STALLS AND NO OIL CHANGE, THANKS

The Grot-o-Rama cinema was an awful place. It was dirty beyond even the nightmares of Johnny Lightfoot, the lurid purple and yellow paint was peeling off the walls in great strips and, most horribly of all, it only showed movies which had been made at Robotnik Studios. There were eight different screens there and they were all showing robot movies. A surprisingly high percentage of them also featured hedgehogs who came to sticky ends.

‘Well, what do you want to see? *A Fistful of Robots? For a Few Robots More?* How about this one — it's got Robot Di Nero in it, or perhaps *All Robotnik's Men* with Robot Redford?’

‘We won't be able to get in. They've all got “R” certificates— robots only. Now, where's this popcorn dispenser?’ Tails knew that there was more to a trip to the movies than watching the film.

Hiding around the corner, keeping in the dark, Porker and the other animals waited anxiously for Sonic and Tails to return. When they did, they came haring around the corner with a large and only very slightly bird-like popcorn dispenser clutched in Sonic's paws.

‘Let's get out of here. We had to distract the ticket collector for a moment by stomping him, and that cute little Newtron on the hot dog stand won't be selling any more for a bit,’ Tails said breathlessly.

‘Mmmmmmm,’ Sonic agreed through a mouthful of hot dog, extra mustard, hold the onions.

‘Do we know that's Flicky?’ Johnny asked as they made good their escape through darkened back streets of the Metropolis.

‘Let's put it this way, dude,’ Sonic replied. ‘Either it's Flicky or Robotnik's just invented a chirping popcorn dispenser and, to be honest, I

don't think he'd bother.'



The five friends were huddled under some rusted, corrugated iron on wasteland by the edge of the Metropolis. There had been a few spots of rain, which had forced them to get under cover. The acid rain of the Metropolis wasn't a hazard to be taken lightly.

'You'd better stay safe here,' Sonic told them. 'Trying to find Joe, changing him and Flicky back, and then destroying Robotnik's machine and saving the entire planet — well, that's hedgehog stuff. You guys would be exposed to too much danger if you came with us.' Sonic was adamant about that, and to be frank the other animals weren't about to disagree.

'But, Sonic, Robotnik's bound to have search crews of robots everywhere. And they're going to come looking for places like this where we might be expected to hide out. They'll find us in no time!' Tails thought he'd said something sensible. He didn't understand why Sonic was looking very displeased with him.

'Like I was saying, you'll be safe enough here —'

'But — But —'

'Shut up,' Sonic snapped irritably. He had enough to worry about as it was, what with Joe and Chirps still to find, an evil genius whose downfall he had to scheme, and a meganormous secret laboratory to first find and then wipe out. But hey, that wasn't the little dude's fault, now was it? 'Sorry, Tails. Time to chill out the stress here. Well, has anyone got any better ideas?'



'I can't believe we're doing this,' Porker complained. 'I have bad memories about this kind of thing.' He clanked along unhappily.

'Look, we all agreed, right? All you have to do is watch the all-night show. We'll be all done by then. We'll come and get you.' Tails wasn't certain of the plan either. But they had been very fortunate so far. The robot spare-parts warehouse had been deserted when they had returned. There had been no sign of Eggor or any other enemy. Now Sonic and Tails

walked along with three friends dressed in robot parts. Not wanting to risk the Grot-o-Rama, Sonic and Tails stayed just out of sight while the others clanked and clumped their way to the Grodyplaza across the road.

‘What do you reckon, Johnny?’

‘Triple bill for the all-night show: *Ball Hog Heroes*, *Return of the Turtloids*, and *Hedgehog Apocalypse*. Whoops, I don't think Sonic's going to like that one.’ The rabbit grinned.

‘He's not going to be watching it. Look, once we're in the darkness at the back we can just go to sleep and wait for them to come back.’

‘Oh well, here goes...’

They collected their tickets from the automatic ticket dispenser and declined an oil change on the way up to the stalls. Johnny Lightfoot had to tuck Porker's tail into his metal shell on the way up the stairs, where a twenty-armed robot which looked like a large Grabber was snatching tickets from everyone.



Back outside, Sonic and Tails watched their friends enter and, after a few minutes, they guessed that they must be safe and secure in their stalls by now. But hey, they weren't to know that the metal cinema chairs provided for robots were incredibly uncomfortable.

Behind them, an ominous clanking sound clanked ominously.

‘Oh no, more robots!’ Tails groaned. He was getting more than a bit fed up of being chased all over the place by Robotnik's hench-bots.

‘Quick, in here!’ Sonic urged, grabbing Tails by the paw and dragging him into the main street. Just past the Grodyplaza there was a console arcade, where Sonic and Tails hid behind the machines as the phalanx of hunting Grounders crunched past.

‘Have they gone now?’ Tails whispered after a few minutes.

‘Guess so. Who cares? Don't disturb me, I'm about to get a new high score here,’ Sonic grinned. His fingers were flicking furiously at the control pad, racing his aquatic bike through and under the water zones of

the game. It wasn't a patch on a really *good* game like, well, you-know-what, but it kept him amused for a few minutes.

'NEW HIGH SCORE 994,900. YOUR NAME PLEASE?' the console flickered. Sonic just couldn't resist it. There were times when he was just a little bit too proud of himself. In the Metropolis, so close to Robotnik's home, it was a really dumb thing to do to input his own name, but sometimes a hero's massive ego must be satisfied.

'SONIC THE WORLD-FAMOUS HEDGEHOG,' he typed in.

'HELP! SONIC! IS THAT REALLY YOU? THIS IS JOE! I'M TRAPPED INSIDE THIS CONSOLE!'

'Awesome!' exclaimed Sonic, and Tails jumped up to see what all the fuss was about.

Sonic usually played on consoles rather than dismantling them, but this was an emergency. Looking carefully around to make sure he wasn't about to get thrown out of the arcade by a burly bouncer-bot, he detached the console from its wall mountings with a powerful heave. Hoisting the machine onto his back, he yelled at Tails.

'Yo! Bring our popcorn-serving transmogrified bird friend and let's make tracks, dude!'

'That just leaves Chirps! Hey, we're doing very well, aren't we Sonic!' Tails was excited, flushed with success.

'Yeah, but there's also the minor matter of finding the dastardly Robotnik's master laboratory,' Sonic reminded him. 'So we have to head for the centre of the city. And we're going to have to bring Joe and Flicky with us. We can't leave them behind. Robotnik's laboratory is the only place where we know we can get them un-transmogrified.'

'But we still don't know where Chirps is. We don't know *what* Chirps is. I've never heard of that planet Kentuckee Porker told us about.'

'Me neither. Let's just hope Robotnik hasn't already sent him off in a spaceship. Oh, that heinously bad dude! Well, little furry buddy of mine, this is it now. The final march. Centre of the city, here we come.'



Eggor had got back to the laboratory in time; thankfully, he hadn't been missed. Robotnik wobbled in after dinner as usual, having dusted himself off from the mishap at the media studios.

‘Are we ready for Phase Five?’ he demanded of the distracted robot.

Eggor tried to marshal his thoughts and programs. ‘Yes, Master.’

‘And we have totally eradicated — ha ha! — the slight reversal problem?’

‘Oh, yes, Master. After that unfortunate little accident with the Burrobits, the transmogrification cannot now affect robots. We are quite sure of that, Master.’ Eggor was ninety-nine per cent sure. The Transmogriplex had been modified so it couldn't affect robotic life now, as had always been planned. But the last of the prototypes hadn't been corrected. Having forgotten *that* is going to have interesting consequences later. But that's telling you the plot...

‘We shall initiate Phase Five now. Begin the countdown.’ Robotnik peeled some flakes of dried egg white from his moustache.

Eggor, however, did nothing. His mind was momentarily filled to capacity with the delightful mental image of Sally Acorn.

‘Eggor! Do it NOW!! I gave you eggsplicit orders. Do I have to eggspound further on them?’ Robotnik yelled angrily.

The robot's mind lurched back to the here and now. ‘No, Master. Beginning countdown now.’ Eggor began the keying sequence.



Far across the Metropolis, Sonic and Tails looked up at the dark skyline in the distance. Something was definitely different.

‘What's that funny green glow?’ Tails asked.

‘I don't know. It could be anything. It's — wait a minute! Doesn't it look just like —’

‘Yes. The transmogrification ray! Aw no!’ They looked at each other in dismay.

‘But those notes we saw said that it couldn't be finished for a while. Not at least until —’ Tails counted on his fingers. ‘Oh no. With all the time the rats kept us captured and everything... No. We should still have two days at least!’

‘Maybe Robotnik's advanced his plan. He knows we're here. He may even try his hideously uncool experiment before it's ready. Then, who knows what disaster might happen on Mobius?’ Sonic didn't even want to think about it. ‘Dude, this is no time to be standing about talking. We have buddies stuffed into robot suits waiting for our triumphant return. We have a chicken-type buddy to rescue. And all the rest of it. Now we know where the laboratory is. Time for action!’

A few seconds later, the only sign of the hedgehog and fox buddies was a slowly settling cloud of dust.



## 26

# RESCUE THAT SPACE CHICKEN!

‘Eggscellent, most eggscellent. We shall initiate Phase Six — ha ha ha! — at eight o'clock tomorrow morning!’ Robotnik gloated. This called for an eggstra egg, which he cracked into the palm of his hand and sucked at greedily.

‘But Master!’ Eggor was aghast. ‘Master, we are not ready. The Circumventional Vector Analysis isn't completed yet. We haven't fitted the Transverse Ray Diffusers yet. We haven't —’

‘Then make sure you do! By eight o'clock! *Or else I shall have you melted down for scrap!*’ Robotnik screamed.

‘You will be eggsterminated! Eggspunged! Your eggsistence will be terminated! Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Master.’ There was nothing else to say.

‘That hateful pest, Sonic, is here in the Metropolis somewhere. We have to act eggstremely quickly now. Make sure all the laboratory defence patrols are doubled. No, tripled! Check all the alarm systems! No, double-check them! No one must enter; no one! No eggsceptions are to be made!’ Robotnik smashed one fist into the palm of his other hand, unaware that he had just spattered his mid-morning snack in all directions.

‘Of course not, Master.’ Eggor felt himself getting angry, which confused his circuits. Robotnik had often ranted at him like this before, but Eggor had never felt mad before. Perhaps Robotnik's demeanour is so awful that it can even turn a robot against its own programming.

‘Right. I shall conduct a tour of the laboratory at seven o'clock tomorrow morning and eggssamine everything you have done. Ha ha! You had better work eggstremely hard, Eggor.’ The bloated form of Robotnik slobbered off on to the moving stairs he used to move from office to

laboratory and back. Well, this was a large complex, and Robotnik was far too fat to walk such a long distance.

This is impossible, Eggor thought to himself. I can do some of it, but not all. No matter how many robots I bring in to the laboratory. So, tomorrow, I am going to be melted down for scrap metal. Tomorrow, I won't egg-sist any more.

A tiny drop of oil trickled from the corner of one of his eyes.



‘I don't think this is going to work. I mean, it's too obvious.’ Tails clanked along in his robot suit.

‘Why? We've been back to that warehouse twice and there haven't been any ambushes or traps.’ Sonic looked resplendent in the shiniest, smoothest Coconut suit he'd been able to find. He wasn't too happy about that, because it did flatten his supercool spikes somewhat, but sacrifices had to be made when the chips were down.

‘Yeah, I suppose so. I can't understand that, though. After we left that Eggor robot there, I expected that he'd have raised an alarm and the place would be swarming with badniks.’ Tails was puzzled.

‘Well, Sally said he was a funny kind of robot. Like he had some kind of personality or something.’

‘Yeah, but you know how some people are. They get sentimental about stuff like that.’ Tails sniffed a little derisively.

‘Well, maybe, but I don't think they easily get sentimental about something that's kept them in a cage and given them boiled turnip tops to eat,’ Sonic replied acidly. ‘Sally's a smart cookie. Anyway, here are the main gates. Just act real unnatural, dude.’

They clanked safely through the security gates and were standing still, looking around to see where the best point of entry was, when a huge Slicer ran right up to them. It took all their willpower not to run, or to smash the thing. A voice synthesiser in the huge insect-like Slicer yelled a command at them.

‘You! Auxiliary guard duty, Bay C. Abandon all previous duties. Report for anti-hedgehog duty! That is a Level 1 Priority Override Command! Move it!’

Sonic and Tails turned and walked in the direction the Slicer pointed. Bay C was an enormous ship bay, with a pair of Egg-o-Matics, escaped capsules and what looked like parts of a new Wing Fortress under construction. It was also some distance away from the centre of the laboratory, that was plain to see.

‘Well, at least we're inside,’ Sonic whispered when it was safe. ‘If we just clank up and down, round and round the bay, we won't look too out of place. Then we can find out where looks best to go next.’

‘Look! Sonic!’ Tails blurted.

Sonic clamped a metal hand over his friend's mouth. ‘Shut up, dude! I mean, sorry for being so rude, but you really shouldn't use our real names. Let's use some really bogus ones, like, I'm R2P2 and you're C4FO, right?’

‘Okay, Son — I mean, R2P2. But look, over there! It's Chirps!’

Sonic turned his head slowly in what he imagined was a fair approximation to robot movement. Across the bay, in what looked like a small Egg-o-Matic, sat a chicken. Strangely, it was wearing a shiny foil spacesuit.

‘Okay, dude, like, let's walk to one side. Slowly and deliberately. Like this, follow me,’ Sonic said as he danked off to the far wall. Tails followed dutifully, and then Sonic arced around and headed for the ship. The other robots buzzing and swarming around didn't react. So far, so neat.

Inside his little craft, Chirps was singing a happy little song. He smiled when the transparent dome on top of his craft was opened, though he didn't much care for the robots which were peering in at him. They looked kind of wrong somehow. One of them grabbed him and put its hand over his beak. That wasn't very polite at all.

‘Listen, Chirps. I'm Sonic in a robot suit. This is Tails in a robot suit. We've come to rescue you.’ Sonic let his hand go just a little from the chicken's beak.

‘Hello there, Soni—’ Chirps said merrily.

‘Not here, buddy. I’m R2P2.’ Sonic tried to pull a serious face to show how important the code was.

‘Um, well, R2P2, I’m going to be a Space Chicken! I’m being sent to the planet Kentuckee at oh-nine-ah-hundred tomorrow! Whatever that is.’

Tails gasped: he had just seen the temperature control dial on the outside of the capsule.

‘Chirps, have you noticed that your spacesuit —’ Sonic began, trying to be tactful about matters.

‘Yeah, wild isn’t it? It’s radiation-resistant! That’s why it’s so shiny! That’s what they said!’ Chirps preened himself.

‘No it isn’t, Chirps. It’s kitchen foil. And have you noticed that bag of, um, *stuff* behind you?’ Sonic pointed to the yellow-brown bag behind Chirps.

‘Yes! That’s radiation-resistant insulating Space Dust! It’s to keep me safe and warm inside my shiny suit!’

Sonic sighed. This wasn’t going as easily as he’d hoped. ‘Not quite, Chirps. It’s actually a mixture of breadcrumbs and spices made to Dr Robotnik’s own secret recipe.’

‘Sonic, F020, or whatever you are today, what are you trying to say?’ Chirps was confused.

‘Chirps,’ Tails said sadly, ‘there is also a temperature dial on the outside of your oven — I mean, ship. It starts at LOW and goes right up to HIGH. In the middle, it has settings for SELF-BASTING, OLD BROILER and QUICK ROAST. Do I need to say any more?’

Chirps sat with his beak in his claws. ‘You mean that —’

‘Yes. After Robotnik found out that you didn’t lay eggs, he was going to get a meal out of you another way.’

‘Oh, that hateful, deceiving, lying man!’ Chirps snarled.

‘Well, of course he’s a hateful, deceiving, lying man. He’s *Robotnik*, you thick chicken.’ Sonic wished he’d held his tongue there; that was a bit rude. It wasn’t really poor Chirps’s fault that he was in this predicament.

‘Look, Chirps, I’m really sorry. But Tails here and I have to destroy this mega-humungous laboratory and, well, there’s some real stress involved in being a superdude when your spiky back is up against the wall, right? Now, listen. We’ve rescued everyone else. Sally’s safe at home. The others are here in Metropolis. Flicky and Joe are stuffed inside these robot suits.’

Chirps looked at Sonic, his head tilted to one side with curiosity. ‘Are you certain Sonic? There isn’t room, surely? I mean, Joe’s a walrus. He’d never fit inside either of you.’

‘The details aren’t important right now. Just trust us. Now, you are *absolutely* sure that it was nine o’clock tomorrow when you were going to be, um, sent on your space trip? This is *important*.’

‘Absolutely sure!’

‘That must mean that Robotnik was going to have him for lunch tomorrow,’ Tails said quietly. It wasn’t quite quiet enough. Chirps’s lower beak quivered slightly. It was pathetic to see.

‘Don’t worry, it’s not going to happen. Not if a pair of awesomely bodacious superheroes can stop it. We can’t take you with us now, Chirps. We’ve got to find a way of, um, returning Flicky and Joe to their real forms. But we’ll be back. Long before lunch time — er, I mean, launch time. Trust me, dude.’ Sonic reached out with a metal hand and gripped Chirps’s uncertain claw. ‘So sit tight and wait for us to return triumphant!’ He closed the dome of the capsule quietly. Chirps looked fairly agitated inside.

‘Now, let’s hope he doesn’t panic,’ Sonic said grimly. On the wall, one of the ever-present digital clocks read 02:27. It was a lot later than he’d thought and he didn’t like that at all.

## 27

# SCRAMBLED EGGOR

Eggor read down the checklist of all the things he should be doing, but to be quite honest he wasn't that interested any more. He just watched the numbers and information roll by on the screen. He had done everything he could, and it wouldn't be enough. The scrap yard beckoned. He would be dissembled and left in Scrap Brain Zone to rust.

A little blue light flickered on and off on his executive monitoring panel. It was Robotnik's Master Hedgehog Detector. With a flick of the hand, Eggor switched it off. I don't care if that wretched hedgehog is here, he thought. I'm not going to raise the alarm. It doesn't matter now. Nothing matters when you're going to be scrap metal in a few hours' time. Then a thought began to form in his mind...

He'd failed once. He hadn't destroyed the hedgehog, and he had ruined one of the only two prototype transmogrifiers left. But if he should try again, rather than raising a general alarm, and succeed...

Well, *then* the Master wouldn't need to proceed to Phase Six the next morning! And *then* he wouldn't be a pile of steaming scrap metal! But he would have to deal with the hedgehog himself, and this time there must be no mistakes. Picking up the last of Robotnik's ray-gun prototypes, Eggor held it in his metal hands and admired its beauty. It was sleek and shiny. And the best, the very best, thing about it was the way it turned pesky blue hedgehogs into toasters. And made Masters love Eggors.

Flicking the detector back on, Eggor could see the intruders were in Bay C. They were just approaching a door which would bring them right to him. He primed the gun and advanced through the laboratory. Watch out, hedgehog creep, he thought; it's toaster time!



'This way. It definitely brings us closer to the centre.' Tails and Sonic passed through the hatchway, where the metal door swished open. Unlike

any of the others they had met, it spoke to them.

‘Have a nice day,’ it said as they passed through it.

‘Strewth! Tacky or what?’ Tails groaned.

They were five metres down the corridor before the door called, ‘Missing you already!’

‘Wouldn't it be neat to find the dork who invented *that* one?’ Sonic muttered through gritted teeth.

The corridor just seemed to stretch out forever. Far, far in the distance they thought they could see another hatchway, but they couldn't be sure. But it was really the only way to go.

‘Careful, Tails. Look slowly up. If something bad happens, it's time to leave these suits behind and get going in our real dudeforms.’ Sonic spoke softly.

Raising his head just a little, Tails gulped hard. He could see a huge array of crushers above him: the corridor was solidly lined with traps from one end to the other. If they were triggered, it would be hedgehog-and-fox paté on tomorrow's menu, and roast chicken, Of course, but that something they could worry about just at the moment.

They walked along slowly. Really slowly. Neither dared to look up at the waiting crushers. The suspense was crippling. The clock at the end of the corridor read 02:48. The seconds ticked by. Another step. Another step.

‘I think these robot suits just saved our lives,’ Sonic breathed. They were at the end of the corridor, with the door right before them. ‘I just can't believe we've got this far in without being attacked yet.’



That, you little pest, is because I haven't sent anything to attack you, Eggor thought grimly to himself. He could hear everything Tails and Sonic said from the microphones and bugs Robotnik had placed everywhere in the innermost heart of the laboratory. Eggor was getting a little nervous now, because he knew that Tails and Sonic were close to the Transmogriplex, but he also knew they couldn't get at it. So, he pondered

for a moment, why am I worried? That is *irrational*. I'm a robot. I can't be irrational. It was all so confusing.

Gripping his ray gun, Eggor tried to forget that he had such things as worries and anxieties. It just wasn't what Good Robots had, and he badly wanted to be a Good Robot.



‘So that's it, is it? It's *horrible*.’ Tails shuddered at the sight that greeted them.

Our heroes now found themselves standing on a huge circular balcony above a gigantic crystal dome. Inside that dome was the Transmogriplex itself. A knobbled cylinder, fifty or sixty metres long, it looked like the spine of some enormous extinct dinosaur-like creature. Spreading from the spine were perhaps fifty or sixty long, slender, slightly bumpy radiating rods. They were connected to each other by leathery strands of some fibrous material. At one end of the spine, there was a lumpy, vaguely egg-shaped mass; it looked like some kind of brain. The whole assembly seemed to be something halfway between a dinosaur and an enormous bat. It glowed with a sinister green light. Looking up, Tails and Sonic could see that there was no ceiling. Looking down, they saw that, below the domed horror, there were thousands of metal cantilevers and struts. Clearly, the plan was going to be to raise the thing into the sky, far above ground level, so that it could spread its force-field out over the whole of Mobius.

‘Now, dude, we aren't going to be able to just smash *that* thing in our usually bodacious manner.’ Even a trigger-happy hedgehog could see that there was no way he could just smash, stomp or crash this crazy machine into pieces. The dome looked awfully strong and Sonic was sure that as soon as anything, including him — *especially* him — touched it, every robot in the entire place would be here within seconds. There had to be a way to get at some weak point, somewhere. And that meant some radically thorough checking-out before some awesome Super Spinning, or anything like that, was called for.

‘Amazing, isn't it?’ They looked up in utter surprise at the voice which had somehow got so close to them without their realizing it. As one,



Sonic and Tails groaned. They were looking down the barrel of a transmogrifying ray gun. Again. At the other end, with his metal hand on the trigger, stood Eggor. Again. He didn't seem terribly steady on his feet, but that's no reason for arguing with a robot. Not when he has a killer weapon in his hand and it's pointing right at your head.

‘Don't move. I have you surrounded.’ Eggor seemed to be speaking rather slowly, as if he was having to really concentrate on saying the words.

Tails looked askance at Sonic. ‘How can you surround anything?’ he challenged Eggor. ‘You're only one robot. You need *lots* of robots to surround something.’

Eggor thought about it for a moment. ‘I think it's something I saw on a video once. It's what they say when the Good Guys are captured by the Bad Guys, isn't it?’

Sonic knew something was *seriously* wrong with this robot, but as he was staring down the barrel of an instantly paralysing weapon he didn't dare move a muscle.

‘So you admit we're the Good Guys then?’ he asked innocently. Perhaps there was some chance of talking his way out of this situation.

‘Of course not. Now put your hands on your head. Slow, real slow. That's good. Now I am going to turn you into a toaster.’

Nothing happened. Eggor wasn't pressing the trigger. Crikey, this is *radically* weird, Sonic thought. What is happening with this robot? It was about time he took a chance.

‘No, Robotnik, don't turn him into scrap metal!’ he yelled, staring at a point somewhere behind Eggor.

It was a ridiculously old trick. And it worked. Plainly Eggor hadn't seen as many movies as he should have. Eggor half-turned round and, in that instant, Sonic accelerated faster than a hedgehog really ought to. Well, you know how it is: a second slice of being a toaster wasn't something to look forward to.

Sonic hit Eggor full pelt and the robot dropped the ray gun, but just before he did so his finger squeezed the trigger by pure reflex. Yeah, unlucky. The ray hit the shiny floor. It bounced up on to the ceiling, angled

down over the balcony, and hit the crystal dome. It bounced up off the angled facets of the dome, hit the ceiling again and bounced back down. And struck Eggor full in the chest.

The robot split apart with a great sigh. Sonic leapt back, afraid of being struck by the last of the dissipating ray, and then looked down in amazement at what lay on the floor before him.

Eggor had been transmogrified into scrap metal, more or less. The remains of his shattered metal robot body were scattered all over the balcony, and one or two fragments drifted down over the railings and bounced harmlessly off the dome far below.

And in the middle of a twisted mass of metal, rubbing his head and feeling *extremely* confused, sat a very sleek and handsome-looking red squirrel.

All together now: aah!

## 28

# MAYHEM IN THE METROPOLIS

‘I can't seem to remember much,’ the squirrel said, holding his head in his paws. ‘I know I used to live in trees, with green fields and all that, once upon a time. I remember being captured in a net. Then everything went blank. I can remember fragments of life as a robot, but I can't seem to piece them together. I suppose I must have been one of Robotnik's early eggperiments — I mean experiments — with the transmogrifying principle.’ He looked sadly up at Sonic. ‘You know, I can't even remember my name.’

‘Hey, squirrel dude, that is one heavy bummer,’ Sonic said sympathetically. ‘Look, I know it isn't like, really appealing, but can we call you Eggor? We've got to call you something and at least that's the name we used to think of you by.’

‘Well, I suppose so,’ the squirrel said with a frown, plainly not entirely pleased by this.

‘Uh, Sonic, what about this?’ Tails was holding the ray gun. On the floor in front of him stood a console.

‘Does it still work?’ Sonic asked.

‘There's only one way to find out.’

‘Well, we're going to have to do it sometime, so it may as well be now.’

Tails hefted the ray gun, then had a thought. ‘Hey, you'd better put Flicky down here too. We don't know how much juice this gun has got left.’

Sonic placed the popcorn dispenser next to the console. Tails pressed the trigger and fell over backwards as the gun gave a violent recoil. Bathing Joe and Flicky's forms in its green ray, it spluttered and coughed

and the ray faded to nothingness. The barrel of the gun cracked; it was clearly broken. But it had done its job.

A confused bluebird and walrus sat on the floor in front of their buddies.



‘Are you sure they'll be safe with Chirps in that capsule? It was a tight squeeze getting Joe in there. Someone might look in and notice.’ Tails was fretting, as usual.

Sonic sighed. ‘Look, buddy, we managed to sneak them in past the robot guards. That was one bodaciously daring action in itself. We had to hide them somewhere, and we know exactly where they are if anything goes wrong. To be, like, totally honest with you, I think that they'll be as safe there as anywhere. Now we have business with Dr Robotnik. That clock says 03:58 and Eggor said that Robotnik is going to start his inspections in just over three hours. That gives us way enough time, providing nothing delays us. So come on, it's time to give Robotnik his final surprise.’ He turned to Eggor the squirrel. ‘Are you sure you want to hike along with us awesome megadudes?’

‘I think I can help. I remember the layout of the laboratory. I think I can remember some of the computer codes. I could even try to cut off the alarm systems,’ the squirrel replied uncertainly.

Sonic wasn't certain that bringing Eggor with them was a good idea, but there just hadn't been room in Chirps's capsule to hide him as well. And Eggor had been able to guide them through a series of small side-passages which hadn't been lined with traps, getting closer all the time to Robotnik's control centre. The squirrel had certainly proved his worth so far.

‘This is the entry to the control centre. Look, there's an access panel. All I have to do is type in the right code,’ Eggor said. He was concentrating hard, trying to remember the right sequence of numbers. He got the first nine correct. He got the last one correct too. The only mistake he made was typing in an extra number.

Below the access panel a message flickered into life in nasty green letters: 'CODE CORRECT. INVESTIGATIVE CHECK BEGUN. GRADE C INITIAL ALERT.' The doors to the computer centre opened, but the sound of trundling robots could be heard somewhere in the distance as well.

'Well, we're in, but this is trouble! Tails, get ready for some action!' Sonic was accelerating already, dashing into the huge room, dodging in and out of the banks of computers. Tails followed suit, staying a little closer to Eggor. The squirrel was making his way uncertainly to the master control panels, and Tails thought he'd better do his best to protect him. If they were going to protect the Transmogriplex, Eggor's understanding of the computer codes would be vital.

The Slicers and Shellcrakers marched in through a large hatchway which opened with a steamy hydraulic hissing sound. Firing their boomerang-like missiles and chains at Sonic, they advanced into all areas of the control centre. At the back, one of them peeled away from the rest and began to retreat back down the corridor they had entered by.

Uh oh, Sonic told himself, that one's going to raise the alarm. And I can't get to it with this hail of missiles coming at me from all sides.

Tails and Sonic zipped in and out of the badniks, dodging the missiles and crashing into the clumsy robots. Getting behind the Shellcrakers was the easy way of destroying them; they couldn't turn around easily and, once a dude was behind them, it was crash-and-spin time. The Slicers were relatively helpless while their claws were arcing through the air, so advancing on them and ducking was the best move. Sonic and Tails had fought these badniks before, and they crashed and splattered them with brilliant efficiency. Well, what are heroes for? Eggor managed to duck a couple of wayward missiles and continued to work at the keyboards.

When the dust had finally settled, Tails and Sonic looked at the metal debris with an air of satisfaction.

'Hey!' Eggor yelled, plainly pleased with himself. 'I'm pretty sure I've cut off the alarm systems so that the alarms can't escalate. There shouldn't be any more — *Wuurrrghhhh!*' He pointed, wide-eyed, behind Sonic and Tails, who were looking right at him — and away from the slowly opening

secret doorway halfway up the wall in the control centre. A first tracer line of fire from the Cluckers behind it passed just over the squirrel's head.

‘Yikes!’ Twin tails began spinning furiously. Sonic moved like crazy to build up the speed for combined leaps and Super Spins. The machine-gunning Cluckers flew slowly into the centre, seeking out their targets.

Within seconds, the room was bedlam. Bullets sped into computers, which began to spark and explode. Tails just missed a full volley as he desperately moved to get behind the Cluckers. Like so many devices designed by the insane Dr Robotnik, they had several weaknesses: their guns didn't rotate effectively and, once the friends were behind them, they were relatively helpless. Sonic had already sent one spinning and crashing into the Clucker in front of it, taking out two with one attack.

Eggor cowered to make himself as small a target as possible, all the time working furiously at a hand-held keyboard and trying to keep his eyes on the screens. That wasn't easy when some of them were exploding with incoming Clucker fire.

Sonic grabbed one Clucker and swivelled it around in mid-air. The robot kept on machine-gunning, and blew apart three other robots with its redirected missile fire. ‘Radical!’ Sonic yelled happily. ‘Six down and six left. Cluck on this, fiendishly bad badnik dudes!’

It was all over rather quickly after that, but the control centre was getting to be a dangerous place. Computers were exploding everywhere, and thick, smelly blue smoke was rising to the ceiling, hiding everything. Electrical cables were sparking and zipping around like wild, sparky snakes. One or two machines were leaking thick black oil over the floor, and if the sparks hit the oil, well...

‘Into the elevator!’ Eggor yelled. ‘I've cut off the protective force-field around the Transmogriplex. We can destroy it now!’ The three of them rushed for the narrow, cramped elevator and Eggor pressed the lowest button on the panel. The lift descended, jerkily, for some ten metres, then stopped. It was stuck fast.

‘Oh *no!*’ Tails groaned in frustration.

‘No way! We've come all this way and we are NOT going to be stopped by a dorky little elevator with an attitude problem!’ Sonic yelled.

He bunched himself up on the floor and took a flying leap at the hatch on the top. It flew apart and Sonic disappeared into the darkness of the elevator shaft.

‘Oh no! What's happened to him?’ Eggor groaned. From above, the sound of a hedgehog working frantically to fix a jammed pulley and chain let them know that Sonic was doing fine. The elevator cranked back into life, and continued going down. The doors hissed open at the basement level, and Sonic jumped back down into it and out through the doors. Which way now?

‘Like, where is it, dude?’ Sonic was almost bouncing off the walls. This was the Big One.

‘Through there,’ Eggor pointed to the entry doors to the enormous Transmogriplex dome. The squirrel was looking frantically around in all directions. He really wasn't used to this kind of adventure, not being a superdude, and he couldn't believe he was still in one piece!

‘Bust out! Way to go!’ Sonic smashed through the doors into the dome. But even he stopped in his tracks when confronted by the sheer size, and awfulness, of the Transmogriplex. Its green glow was dimmed, but it was enormous, and while Sonic wanted to start smashing the central spine into tiny fragments, he was just a little apprehensive of what would happen when he first jumped on the horror. He knew that Eggor and Tails were uncertain. He had to give them a lead. *He* was the leader, and he had to show them what to do here. It was hero time.

‘Tails! After me, when you know it's safe!’ He leapt on to the machine.

Then everything went black. Oops.

## 29

# IS IT A BIRD? IS IT A PLANE? NO, IT'S A... WHAT?

Tails and Eggor looked with utter dismay at what was bouncing around inside the dome. Like the ball in a pinball machine, the Sonic/toaster was flying off the facets of the dome, bouncing down and striking the Transmogriplex, and then flying crazily off at a wild tangent only to be struck back again. Part of the time, what was flying around was Sonic. Part of the time, it was a toaster.

‘Uh oh,’ said Tails unnecessarily.

‘It's okay,’ Eggor muttered. ‘I think. Look! Bits are breaking off the Transmogriplex. When it's destroyed, the energy will be gone and Sonic will return to his normal form. I think. Maybe.’ Eggor looked on as spellbound as Tails.

Far above them, the dome began to crack. A little fissure appeared in its surface and began to spread along the crystal, just as the spine of the machine below was beginning to crack. But, suddenly, there was something else there. The dome opened, just a little, at the top. And into it flew a black Egg-o-Matic steered by an all-too-familiar figure. An all-too-familiar egg-shaped figure with a big moustache. Clearly, some alarm system had woken Robotnik up to what was happening in his laboratory.

‘Oh no! It's —’ Tails began.

‘You! You!! *You!!!!!!*’ Robotnik screamed madly. He launched a salvo of missiles at Sonic. Egg-shaped flying bombs streamed from the front of the black flying ship and streaked across the sky at Sonic. It was, as it turned out, a very dumb move indeed.

The Sonic/toaster swerved in mid-spin and only narrowly missed being egged to death. It was enough, however. Below him, the first egg-bomb hit the Transmogriplex. One of the side rods snapped off and flew up into the air with the force of the explosion underneath it. Hitching a ride on the rod was Sonic, back in hedgehog form, lifted clear away from the



dissipating green glow of the machine. The rod flew towards the black Egg-o-Matic and, with one final humungous leap, Sonic landed right behind Robotnik in the cockpit. Struggling with the mad scientist, Sonic struck out at the control panel of the flying machine, not minding which buttons he pressed.

The Egg-o-Matic turned over and started to fly along upside-down.

In the cramped cockpit, Sonic held on for dear life. Robotnik struggled and wobbled. He was fat enough to jam himself safely into the cockpit seat, but he was panicking, and his struggles made things worse. With a final, ultimate, 'No! No! *Nnnnoooooooooo!*' he fell out of the cockpit. He dropped like a rat down a drainpipe (a very large rat in a quite spectacularly huge drainpipe, that is).

Robotnik hit the Transmogriifier just as its spine finally gave up the fight to stay in one piece and fell apart. What remained of Robotnik lay in the wreckage of the shattered machine in the last of the green glow for all to see. His own machine had turned him into an enormous egg-timer. It rattled and wobbled from side to side for a while, and then stood still.

Three happy people cheered loudly. It was over. The machine was destroyed and Robotnik was defeated in a way not even Sonic and Tails had expected.

However, Sonic was still in the Egg-o-Matic, which was beginning to veer out of control. It began to descend, gliding at first but then gaining speed and obviously about to crash-land. Sonic leapt out just in time and landed not far from Eggor and Tails. The wobbling, out-of-control ship flew on past them and crashed into the huge doors far across the chamber. An enormous explosion ripped apart an entire wall, and plumes of fire and smoke poured into the ruins of the Transmogriplex.

Alarm bells rang. Buzzers and sirens wailed. But, beyond the ripped-out walls, Sonic and the others could see robots flying and meandering around quite aimlessly. There was no one to control them now. No one was going to come and harass our heroes. Robotnik wasn't going to be issuing any orders for a while, and the computer centre was as big a mess as the one they were in the middle of now.

Sonic addressed his pals. 'Dudes and buddies, we have to find a chicken shortly prior to basting, uh, I mean take-off, and then we have to

go and see the end of a movie to bring out our other friend-dudes. Another totally radical success. Wipe out!’

# **30**

## **ONE SQUIRREL TOO MANY**

It was party time in Green Hill Zone. Everyone wanted to hear the story of the final defeat of Dr Robotnik, and everyone was pretty happy that they weren't going to be transmogrified after all. It had to be said that not everyone present understood exactly what that meant, but it sounded pretty grim and if Robotnik was behind it all, they were darned relieved that it wasn't going to happen to them.

Cola and soda flowed in fizzy rivers. Pizza, burgers, fries, chips, nachos and all manner of edible things were consumed in quantities even Sonic found amazing.

‘And Robotnik's gone for good!’ Tails said happily chomping on a treble cheeseburger with all the trimmings thrice. It was so large he could barely get his mouth to it, but he sure as anything was going to give it a try.

‘Somehow I don't think so,’ Sonic said. ‘I don't mean to be a party-pooper or bring everybody down or nothing, but I bet that heinous ratfink had some kind of way of saving himself from his own machine. Remember that his prototypes could have a reversed action, otherwise I'd still be a toaster, right? Something tells me that some nasty little robot somewhere is going to be able to return Robotnik to his true form. But he'll be out of action for quite some time. And talking of robots,’ Sonic muttered rather darkly, looking around...

It was the one thing that hadn't quite worked out right. Everyone was glad that Eggor had been returned to his proper form. But Sonic and Tails were quite miffed that he was such a handsome dude of a squirrel. The reason was sitting just a few metres away.

‘So you still can't remember what happened to you before Robotnik imprisoned you inside that robot? Oh, you poor thing,’ said Sally, stroking the fur on his forehead.

‘Well, Sally, it's really hard, you know? I think my name was... Valentino.’

‘Oh, that's such a *romantic* name!’ Sally's eyes got wider.

‘Yes. And, you know, it was you who saved Mobius, really.’ Valentino stared deep into her eyes.

‘What? How?’ Sally was really excited.

‘Well, you were what made me stop behaving like a robot. I kept thinking about you. I used to keep looking at your face on the monitors. I couldn't get you out of my mind. Then I knew I had a mind, and I couldn't be just a robot.’

Sally blushed a deep crimson and bobbed her tail just a little. ‘But how did that save the planet?’ she asked breathlessly.

‘Because I didn't act like a robot any more. I didn't activate the alarms when Sonic and Tails arrived. And I was able to make sure the defences of the machine were removed. I know I'm not a superhero or anything, but, well, I did my part.’ Valento smirked just a little.

‘That's wonderful!’ Sally beamed. ‘You know, perhaps you are a real hero after all!’

Tails had sneaked up close enough to overhear most of that. Walking back to Sonic, he had a sour expression on his face.

‘It's awful! He's just one squirrel too many. I mean, I know he helped us, but we'd have triumphed anyway!’

‘That's because we're totally triumphantly superdudes. And he definitely *isn't*,’ Sonic snarled.

‘And he's making up to Sally! She's *our* buddy! This is grotty!’

‘Sssshhh! They're coming this way.’

Sally and Valentino walked past Sonic and Tails. Sally didn't say anything to them; she was too busy holding Valentino's hand and stroking his forehead.

‘Well, if you don't know where you live you'd better stay with me. I'll look after you while you try to remember everything about your past.’

‘Thank you so much. You're so kind and sweet!’ The squirrels walked off hand-in-hand into the distance.

‘Yuck! I think I'm going to be sick!’ Tails made a face and stuck his tongue out. ‘It's so *tacky!*’

Sonic was only half-listening. Gazing into the distance, a smile was beginning to appear on his face. He could see someone appearing over the horizon and he had a sudden intuition about why she might be here.

‘There's nothing to smile about, Sonic! That Valentino — *all* the girls are looking at him! And *we're* the cool dudes round here!’

‘Don't look now, little buddy, but I think something rather interesting is about to happen. Well cool!’



‘Would you like some of my best hazelnuts?’ Sally enquired. Valentino stretched out on a comfortable chair and held one paw to his head.

‘Oh, thank you, but I'm feeling a little light-headed. You know, if you hadn't taken me in and cared for me, I don't know *what* would have happened to me!’

Sally rushed over to stroke Valentino's forehead again. ‘I'll look after you for as long as you need me, and —’

Suddenly the front door to Sally's house flew open. In the doorway stood a furious-looking female red squirrel. She had curlers in her hair and a heavy frying-pan in one of her paws.

‘You! Here you are at last! You run away and leave me, and now what have you got to say for yourself?’ She raised the pan threateningly. Valentino cowered on the chair.

‘But poor Valentino, he's been turned into a robot and he's got amnesia and —’

‘Valentino? *VALENTINO??* His name's Kevin! Calls himself Valentino now, does he? You worthless rat! You run off and abandon us and now I find you chatting away with this, this *BIMBO!*’

‘How dare you!’ Sally leapt up angrily. Valentino cowered back a bit further into the armchair. Some more of his past life seemed to be coming back to him. No wonder he'd run away from home. Just before Robotnik

had captured him. When a heavy pan clonked him right on the head, it *all* came back to him in one sudden, horrible moment...



‘You know, Tails, I don't think we're going to have any troubles with Valentino-type dweebs round here,’ Sonic said as he relaxed over his fifth chocolate soda of the day. In the distance, Kevin was running for dear life, being chased by a furious female squirrel armed with a pan which had already given him a couple of good whacks on the head.

‘Serves him right,’ Tails sniggered contentedly, feeling only the slightest bit guilty.

‘Well, it's been a good day. Saved the planet again. Defeated Robotnik. Rescued our friends. Business as usual for hero dudes like yours truly. Ah, here comes Sally,’ Sonic chortled.

Sally's eyes were downcast and she didn't say anything. She just looked miserable and held her glass of soda tightly to her chest.

Sonic theatrically slapped a hand across his forehead. ‘*Ohhhhh*,’ he wailed, ‘Oh, I don't feel well. I'm sort of light-headed. Would you cool my fevered brow, Sally? You're so kind and sweet.’



The trouble with some people, Sonic reflected as he wiped the last of the soda off his sticky spikes, is that they just don't have a sense of humour.



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